



*The* BAR 20 RIDES AGAIN  
By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

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"Bar-20," "Bar-20 Days," "Bar-20 Three," "Buck Peters,  
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"Hopalong Cassidy," "Hopalong Cassidy's  
Return," "Johnny Nelson," "The Men from  
Bar-20," "The Orphan," "Rustlers' Valley,"  
"Tex," etc.



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A. L. BURT COMPANY  
Publishers

New York

Published by arrangement with Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc.

Printed in U. S. A.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT THE  
COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

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## CHAPTER I

### A STRANGER VISITS GUNSIGHT

**D**AVE GREEN finished mopping off the bar and waddled sideways along it toward the big chair at its open end. Dave, to his utter disgust, was fat; he was very fat, and growing fatter. His mid-section bulk was such that he found himself knocking things from the shelves under the long counter unless he kept this possibility in mind and moved with due caution. Having made this particular trip to the chair without accident, he lowered his bulk to the firm seat and sighed gratefully. The sigh was no more than uttered before the sound of loping horses made him frown. More customers were about to bother him.

The horses stopped, and soon the riders stepped into the big room.

"Sit still, Dave," said the younger of the two. "Sit right there; I know where to find it." The speaker vaulted over the counter and took up the duties of bartender. "What'll you have, Dad?"

Arnold pointed to the bottle already in his son-in-law's hand, and caught the spinning glass before it slid over the edge. He filled two glasses, pushed the bottle

back again and waited until his companion, depositing the price of the drinks in an old cigar box, vaulted over the bar again and joined him.

"Thanks, Johnny," grunted Dave, placidly. "Yo're a comfortable man to have around. How's everythin' on th' SV?"

"Placid an' prosperous," replied Johnny Nelson, pushing the glass from him. "Goin' to have a nice big drive herd right soon. Th' boys are roundin' up tomorrow. Figger on three, four hundred beeves, all in th' SV mark. Sherwood come in yet?" He was referring to Lin Sherwood, foreman of the Double X, over west of town, whose range gradually blended into the desert farther west. He and Sherwood had agreed between them to make up a specified number of steers for the season's first trail herd of Twitchell and Carpenter, which would be due in about a week. This was a pleasant arrangement all around, and saved both of the ranches from making drives on their own account. They received a fair price for their cattle, and were saved the responsibility and trouble of driving over the trail.

"This was th' day he was to come in," answered Dave, "but he ain't got here yet. You keep yore new job, tendin' bar, when he does. Heard anythin' from Cassidy an' Connors, or that Tex Ewalt feller an' his bride?"

"Never hear nothin' from th' first two," said Johnny, straddling a chair at a table. "Never hear nothin' from Tex, neither; but his wife wrote to my wife that he was all snug up north. Foreman of a big cattle outfit, an'

makin' good money. Gets some kind of a cut out of th' profits, too. They got a good man, if they only know it. What's th' matter with th' boys?"

"If you mean Dailey an' Fannin', I reckon they can be found if you holler out of th' back door. Itchin' for a game?"

"Not particular," answered Johnny. "Just wonderin' how they are. It's been all of three days since I was here." He grinned cheerfully. "How's Doc?"

"Doc's first rate," answered Dave. "Went down to th' Triangle little while ago. One of them boys got shied into some barb wire."

Dave nodded. He was picturing Doctor Reed as that person had been at the time Johnny Nelson had drifted into Gunsight and gracefully if somewhat energetically inserted himself into local affairs. Times had changed greatly since that momentous day. At that time the doctor had been a puzzle to Dave and the rest of the inhabitants roundabout; a nervous, irritable, white-skinned individual with alternate periods of marked depression and cheerfulness. He also had been on the wrong side of local affairs. Now, thanks to the shock administered by this same smiling Johnny Nelson, the doctor looked healthy, always had a man's appetite, and was no longer irritable, pasty white, or nervous. He had made a man's fight against the abuse of drugs, won it, and was now a new person.

"Knowed they'd wander into th' chute for their brandin' if I just set patient," said a pleasant voice outside the front door. Ben Dailey stood leaning against the frame, mopping his bald head and grinning



happily. "Now for the brandin'. If you ain't got much in yore pockets, yore credit's good with me."

"Hello, Ben," chuckled Johnny. "Wait till Lin an' me gets through with business. I'll buy you a drink an' hand it to you myself." He went behind the bar and made good the promise, Dave beaming upon him. "Nope—you'll have to drink alone. I've already had mine."

"Here's to bachelorhood," said Ben, reverently raising the glass. "Since you got married yo're shore failin' fast. My G——d! One drink a day! Well, here's my third—an' it'll move along for th' fourth."

Johnny did not answer the friendly taunt. Let them think it was married life that had brought him to a maximum of one drink a day. They might honestly believe that he was foolish if they knew the real reason for his temperance. Two-Spot had been a drunken bum who had died like a man, died with his mouth shut, and because he refused to tell things which well might mean death to his friend Nelson. Two-Spot had worried about Johnny's drinking. Alive, Johnny had paid no attention to his pleas; dead, Johnny paid his memory this tribute.

A clatter of hoofs drew near the building, and Dave groaned again.

"More customers," he growled. "Sounds like a hull passel of 'em, too."

The riders stopped in front of the saloon, dismounted and stamped in, shedding dust with every movement. There were fourteen of them, and every man wore a grin of anticipation. Dave lifted himself out of his

chair and moved carefully along the bar. The bottles slid from hand to hand, glasses clattered, and the dust moved upward from the shifting, shuffling feet. The leader of the strangers looked about the room and gestured invitingly, took the smiling refusals in good nature, and turned to his glass. Laughter and noisy conversation rang out along the counter as the bottles moved back again, and the leader left his companions to go toward the little table.

"Howdy, friends," he said, pleasantly. "Ridin's dusty work."

"Shore is," said Arnold, moving a chair and waving at it. "Sit down."

The stranger complied and leaned back.

"Accordin' to what we was told, this town must be Gunsight," he said.

"Bull's-eye," said Johnny, nodding.

"Well, we're *that* far along, anyhow," replied the stranger. "My name's Perdue, from up Colorado way. Half of them fellers belong to my outfit; th' other half are from another ranch. We're all ridin' down to trail a couple of herds north."

"Glad to meet you," said Johnny. "My name's Nelson, of th' SV. This is Mr. Arnold, owner of th' same ranch; an' this is Mr. Dailey, th' storekeeper next door. How come yo're goin' down after th' herds? Won't they trail 'em up for you?"

"Buyin' from some relatives, which is poor business," explained Mr. Perdue, who was paying Johnny close attention. "They wrote that they had all their crews on th' trail. If I wanted th' cattle before fall I'd

have to come an' get 'em. Seein' we want to summer-graze 'em, we're on our way. Been a long time since any of us drove over th' trail, an' we reckoned we'd like to give it a whirl for old time's sake." He drew out a pipe and filled it. "Can we make th' next town by dark?"

"If you push right steady," answered Dailey. "Fanning will be sorry to lose so much trade," he said, smiling. "'Tain't often he gets fourteen hungry fellers in a bunch."

"Fannin' bein' th' hotel keeper," explained Arnold.

Mr. Perdue laughed and lit his pipe. Then he turned to Johnny again.

"Foreman of that SV ranch, Mr. Nelson?" he asked.

Johnny nodded, trying to appear cordial and unrestrained. This little man affected him strangely. The cold gray eyes were hard and searching; the lean, stubble-covered face was grim even when it smiled, for the smiles were like those of a wolf. The thirteen men at the bar, idling, talking, and drinking their second round slowly, did not seem at ease; and when Johnny had introduced himself, their gazes sought him out. He never had seen any of them before, but he found himself unaccountably alert, and was a little vexed with himself for it. The crowd at the bar broke up, some straying to the tables and asking for cards; others going out into the street to loaf and to wander about. Dailey excused himself to attend to whatever customers might need his services.

"You was askin' if you could make th' next town before dark," said Johnny to the stranger. "Come

to think of it, I wouldn't hardly advise it, if you've come far."

"Left Juniper this mornin'," said Mr. Perdue. "How long a ride is it to th' next place?"

"Too far—forty miles, an' some of 'em dry an' mean. Better stay here to-night an' get a fresh start in th' mornin'."

"Reckon we had better," soliloquized Mr. Perdue, critically studying the face in front of him. "Where is this hotel man, so I can tell him what's goin' to drop on to his cookin' an' beds?"

"Tell him for you," offered Johnny, arising. He looked about. "Fourteen?"

"Fourteen," echoed Mr. Perdue, thinking that his companion had counted the men before some of them had strayed away. He arose. "Go along with you." He turned to the men in the room. "Stoppin' here overnight, boys; we'll put up th' hosses." He chuckled at the happy grins and turned to his companion.

"Right around back," said Johnny, waving his hand, and led the stranger out of the rear door.

Jim Fanning met them with a smile, heard the demands that were to be made on his hospitality, and frankly scratched his head.

"Of course, I can feed you all," he said; "but I'll have to pack some of you three in a bed; or rig up somethin' on th' floor. Only got five beds."

"That's three more'n they had at th' last place," laughed Mr. Perdue. "My boys can sleep on cactus."

While they discussed the arrangements, Johnny strolled to the door and looked out. A horseman was

coming along the west trail, and he knew it to be Lin Sherwood. He stepped into the street and waited for Lin to approach, and was there joined by the stranger. Johnny felt a little crowded, but concealed it, telling himself that he was too touchy, too imaginative.

"Some of this country around here is right fine," said Mr. Perdue, who was able to catch sight of parts of Green Valley where the road crossed the stream. "Cattle oughta do right smart well; but there ain't nothin' like a Northern range to harden 'em an' put weight on to 'em."

"Yes," replied Johnny. "I put in a couple years punchin' up in Montany. Fine country up there, but most teetotal damned cold in th' winter."

"We get it purty cold up our way, we're so high in th' air," replied the stranger.

Lin Sherwood turned from the narrow trail into the dusty street and soon drew up alongside the two.

"Howdy, Johnny," he said, and nodded to the other.

"Meet Mr. Sherwood, Mr——" Johnny hesitated, from choice, and regarded the stranger calmly.

"Perdue, sir—Perdue," offered the stranger, without hesitation. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Sherwood. I was just tellin' Mr. Nelson, here, what a fine country this is. I allus had th' idear that you fellers was a lot of sand hogs, down this way. Thought it was mostly desert."

Lin laughed and pointed over his shoulder, his broad thumb indicating the west.

"Th' desert's not so very far off yonder," he said; "an' it ain't so very far off east of here, neither. You buyin' cattle?"



"I done bought 'em; goin' after 'em now, me an' th' boys," said Mr. Perdue. "Join me in a drink?"

"Take one with you to wash away th' dust," said Sherwood, genially.

"Mr. Nelson wouldn't drink with me, little while back," said Mr. Perdue, smiling a little. He was tensed to get the reaction from this careless statement and when it came it greatly reassured him.

"Oh, then Nelson already had one," chuckled Sherwood. "He's a married man, an' one a day's his ration. Has been for couple of years. Never saw him vary from it." He chuckled again. "I ain't wearin' no hobbles, Mr. Perdue; an' I admit I'm right thirsty."

"One a day is cuttin' it purty fine," laughed the stranger, turning; "but it's playin' on th' right side. Mebby he'll give us his moral support an' have a seegar."

"Shore will," replied Johnny. "When I start drinkin', I can't stop, after I've had two or three; an' likker allus makes me helpless."

Sherwood snorted and then guffawed.

"Yeah! You shore are a helpless *hombre*, you are!"

Laughing and chatting, they went to the saloon and found the visiting punchers enjoying themselves. Dailey had done a good day's business in his store and was now playing cards with one crowd, keeping continual grins on their faces with his sallies and his unfailing good nature. They were playing to pass away the time, and the stakes were small. Laughter boomed out frequently, and a general air of good fellowship prevailed, yet Johnny found his eyes narrowing at

times, and the feeling of vague mistrust bothered him. Why should he find eyes on him all the time, and eyes that quickly looked elsewhere whenever he turned his head unexpectedly? After a few minutes, he signalled his father-in-law, caught Sherwood's eye, and moved toward the door.

Mr. Perdue, standing at the side of one of his men, looked up in surprise at the movement.

"Goin' so soon, Mr. Nelson?" he asked, stepping forward.

Johnny caught himself going into a crouch, checked the movement, smiled and held out his hand.

"Yes, I reckon I'll be ridin' home ag'in," he answered. "Got to talk a little business with Sherwood, first. Glad to have met you, Mr. ——" again he hesitated, frowning in vexation.

"Perdue—Perdue's th' name," supplied that person promptly, as he met Johnny's grip with just the right pressure.

"I'm ashamed of myself, Mr. Perdue," apologized Johnny. "I never did have much of a mem'ry for names; an' to-day it shore is makin' a damn fool out o' me. Hope to meet you when you come back with th' herd; an' I'll bet you eight bits I'll remember yore name then."

"Perdue's a sorta unusual name in some parts of th' country," said its owner, smiling. "Won't bet you, for I'm dead shore you'll remember it; an' I shore will see you ag'in."

With the last words Johnny grabbed hold of his lifting

suspicious and held them down by main force; but there did seem to be a grim, mocking gleam in the cold gray eyes when those two last remarks were made. He fought down the distrust and laughed to hide it.

"If I see yore sign in th' sky early enough on that day, I'll save up my one drink an' have you join me in it."

"Good enough! Good-bye, Mr. Arnold; good-bye, Mr. Sherwood, if I don't see you ag'in."

"Oh, you'll see me," chuckled Sherwood. "It's Nelson that's a one-drink man; I'm aimin' to help you change a dry an' dusty afternoon into somethin' a lot better."

"Good news, plumb good news," said Mr. Perdue, genially, and turned away to take part in the careless conversation of some of his men.

Johnny and Sherwood agreed on the time for the round-ups and delivery of their cattle to the already moving herd of Twitchell and Carpenter. They arranged minor details and parted, Sherwood to return to entertain Mr. Perdue, and Johnny and Arnold to ride toward the ranch.

Half a mile had been covered when Arnold glanced sidewise at his quiet companion.

"What's makin' you so thoughtful, Johnny?"

Johnny came out of the reverie and shook his head. Instead of answering the question, he asked one.

"What do you think of Mr. Perdue?" His eyes were on his father-in-law's face.

"Pleasant, affable gentleman; a little worried, mebbly,

by havin' that baker's dozen to keep sober and out of mischief; but a pleasant, engagin' gentleman. Why?"

"Reckon mebby he is all of that," said Johnny, thoughtfully. "An' havin' that bunch of boys to hold down has mebby made him a little unnatural." He rode on, silently weighing things, and then grinned a little shamefacedly. "I shore got a suspicious nature. Found myself tryin' to read Mr. Perdue; an' forgettin' his name so as to see if he had any trouble rememberin' it. Didn't have none, a-tall. Answered right on th' jump. I felt like somethin' was in th' air, an' caught myself gettin' riled because I couldn't put a name to it. But you tell me this: Why was they all stealin' looks at me? Every time I turned my head quick somebody looked away. Why was that?"

Arnold chuckled proudly.

"Boy, why wouldn't they look at you?" he demanded with spirit. "You don't think folks haven't heard about you and that old Bar 20 gang, do you? Hah! More folks know you by name an' reputation than you know. Lots more."

"But what makes me so suspicious?"

"How was you raised?"

Johnny nodded.

"Reckon so," he said, and laughed gently, affectionately. "Anybody raised on that old ranch, with Hopalong an' Red an' th' rest of 'em, shore was filled plumb full of suspicion." His eyes glowed and softened. "Well, we had to be that way. Trouble is, times have changed, an' I ain't changed with 'em."

"No, Johnny; some things have changed, but not all.

Conditions have, and this particular part of th' country has, after you did th' changin'; but human beings are just th' same, averagin' 'em up."

Johnny did not answer, and in a few moments he turned to other thoughts.

"Lin will be ready when we are," he said, and for the rest of the way to the ranch they talked of cattle. They did not know it, but if they had continued to discuss Mr. Perdue and his men, they still would have been talking of cattle. Could they have heard the conversations going on in Gunsight they would have been much disturbed and might have been forewarned somewhat against calamity.



## CHAPTER II

### INFORMATION WANTED—AND USED

SHERWOOD looked around and espied his new acquaintance sitting alone at a table in a corner, waved his hand reassuringly, and stopped at the bar for a moment.

"Dave, gimme a bottle an' a couple of glasses, an' we won't bother you no more," he said cheerfully. He raised his voice to check the stranger, who was rising from his chair. "Stay there, Mr. Perdue; I'm bringin th' bottle with me. Dave, gimme a handful of cigars." He picked up the articles as Dave supplied them, and walked toward the corner, exchanging grins with the happy baker's dozen, and he had a joke with Dailey.

"Now, don't you tell 'em how good I can play, Lin, an' scare 'em all away," retorted Dailey, polishing his bald spot and turning back to the game.

"Well," said Mr. Perdue, chuckling and rubbing his hands. "This shore looks like home. Glad I stayed over, Mr. Sherwood." He emptied his pipe, put it away, and bit off the end of a cigar. "I insist that th' treatin' is on me, since yo're kind enough to help me pass away th' time so pleasantly."

"No, sir-e-e-e; *I'm* buyin', to-day," replied Sher-

wood, filling the glasses. He was in rare good humour, for everything had gone exceptionally well on the ranch for the last year, and he would soon write out a report on his stewardship that would gladden the ears of the owners.

"Can't have that, Mr. Sherwood; I want to feel free an' unrestrained," said the stranger.

"You get enough of Dave's likker into you an' you shore will feel just that way," laughed Sherwood. "No, sir; yo're a stranger to Gunsight. I'm treatin'; an' here's how!"

"Match you for th' bill," suggested Mr. Perdue, producing a gold piece.

Sherwood hesitated, saw that the stranger was very much in earnest, and agreed somewhat reluctantly. The stranger won, stuck Sherwood, and settled back in his chair, laughing contentedly.

"Ought to have plenty of fine cattle around here," said the trail boss, opening his mouth to test the flavour of the liquor. He looked a little surprised, and turned the bottle around to read the label. "First-rate likker; good's any I've had in a mighty long time."

"Dave keeps this brand hid under th' counter," said Sherwood, and rolled the cigar over to the other corner of his mouth. He liked Mr. Perdue, and the liquor he had had was making him mellow.

"Yes, sir; any country that has likker as good as this ought to have fine cattle," said the stranger.

"Couldn't help havin' good cattle, with th' grass an' water we got," said Sherwood, his local pride growing and enthusing him. "We don't have no losses no more,

since Nelson cut loose an' cleaned up th' range. Did most of it hisself, too. Fine boy, Nelson. You wouldn't reckon he is a shore old-time gun-thrower, would you, to look at him?"

"Why, no—can't say I would. He struck me as sorta mild an' easy-goin'," lied Mr. Perdue.

"You oughta see him when he strikes you th' other way," chuckled Lin, proudly. "He's one of that old Bar 20 bunch, an' he come down here alone, some years back, when this range was shore uncertain. Cleaned up th' Bar H gang of thieves an' made things sweet as sugar. Why, even Nevady, over in Snake Buttes, quit pesterin' us right soon after Nelson went on th' prod. We don't lose no more cattle, a-tall; less than one per cent."

"Is that so?" marvelled Mr. Perdue, refilling both glasses. "Why, we lose two per cent. from nat'ral causes, up our way. You fellers ought to drive right heavy, down here."

"Don't do no drivin' for ourselves no more," said Sherwood, putting down the empty glass. "We sell to th' T. & C. They pick up our trail stuff an' keep on goin'." He looked critically at his cigar, licked a break in the wrapper, and blew gently through it to make it burn right. "We're givin' th' T. & C. nine hundred head of prime beef this season; an' we'll give 'em more, later on. Start roundin' up to-morrow. We'll throw th' two herds near th' trail, a ' say good-bye to 'em when th' trail herd passes."

"You throwin' in nine hundred head? How many is Nelson supplyin'?" asked Mr. Perdue, greatly im-

pressed. "I had no idear you had so big a ranch, Mr. Sherwood."

"Oh, that's both our herds, together," explained Sherwood, reaching for the glass, and idly noting that it had been filled again.

"Who's th' T. & C. you mentioned? An' who is this Nevady?"

"Twitchell an' Carpenter, of Sandy Bend. They got a range of their own, down Mesquite way. Nevady is a damn rustler over in Snake Buttes, west of here. Used to make things purty hot for me; but things got purty hot for him down this way, an' he reckoned th' ranges north of th' buttes was healthier. Heard he's been raisin' hell up that way. Word has come down, recent, however, that he's lettin' them ranches alone, too. If he don't look out we'll all have to throw in an' smoke him out."

"Why ain't you done it before this?" asked Mr. Perdue, his eyes blazing momentarily.

"You don't know that there butte country," growled Sherwood, shaking his head. "We're satisfied to let things stay just like they are. Ain't no sense of stirrin' up a snake's nest when you don't have to."

"Well, there's common sense in that," admitted Mr. Perdue, closing his eyes as though to rest them. He smiled, opened them again, and reached for the bottle. "Take you some time to round up, cut out, an' road-brand that many steers in country as rough as this."

"Well, we run th' regular round-up about this time of the year," said Sherwood, lifting the glass. "First cut will be th' trail cattle. One gang will drive that

off an' take care of it while th' extry men handle th' calves. Chute-brandin' saves a lot of time, an' we force th' work. Ought to have th' T. & C. cattle ready by th' end of th' week. Th' T. & C. will be along in about ten days, which gives us extry time if we need it."

"Hold 'em out on yore own range till near th' last day, I reckon," said the stranger, "to keep from mixin'."

"Shore, Perdue," said Sherwood. "When we see th' sign in th' sky we move 'em down to th' trail, me, th' SV, an' th' Triangle. I keep mine a day's drive west of here, an' th' T. & C. picks 'em up after they've got th' Triangle stuff. Nelson's herd will be in a little valley further along, an' will be picked up last. We loose-herd 'em to keep 'em contented, feed 'em good on th' best grass, bed 'em down not far from water on some nice, high divide where th' air keeps stirrin'. Everythin' runs like it's oiled."

"An' when th' T. & C. picks 'em up," said Mr. Perdue, smiling, "they're fresh an' ready to move right along. Much better than if they'd come up th' trail so far." He cogitated for a moment. "After they get trail-broke an' handle easy, them fresh strong cattle from hereabouts shore will help to keep down th' size of th' drag."

"Shore will," agreed Sherwood. "Aimin' to drive yore cattle back this way?"

"Ain't seen no reason, so far, not to," answered Mr. Perdue. "I'm a mite surprised, Sherwood: reckoned this was purty poor trailin' country; but if it's as good th' rest of th' way, I'm figgerin' we could pick out a worse route."



"You just come over one dry stretch, if you come down from Juniper," said Sherwood. "Twenty miles wide, it is. You can easy make it in one day, if you want to push 'em. An' you know that there's plenty of runnin' water at th' end of it, too. Clear Crick never goes dry, which is sayin' somethin for a crick in this country. I allus figgered, somehow, that it rose over in th' Snake Buttes, an' flowed underground till it busts out where it does. They call me crazy, an' say there ain't no water in th' buttes, except a hole here an' there. They say Nevady raids through 'em, an' don't stop. Well, south of here, between Gunsight an' Highbank, is another dry stretch of about twenty-five miles, an' there's another certain stream at th' end of it. If you foller th' trail an' don't try no cut-offs, them two are th' longest drives without water. You'll come back this way, all right, after you see th' trail."

Jim Fanning stuck his head in at the back door and then followed it with the rest of his body. Seeing the two friendly individuals at their own table, and the label on the bottle, he sauntered over and stopped beside them.

"Nice select little party," he said, grinning. "See you got th' sacred bottle."

"Allus room for a friend," said Sherwood, reaching back for another chair. "Can you feed me, too, to-night, Jim? I figger on stayin' till after dark. Want to have a little fun before th' round-up starts. Set down, Jim, an' make her three-corner. Reckon you an' Perdue know each other?"

"We been made acquainted accordin' to th' rules,"

chuckled Perdue, trying to catch Dave's eye for another glass. He succeeded, and Dave waddled over with it.

"Dave, shake han's with my friend, Perdue," said Sherwood. "Owns a big ranch up Colyrady way. Goin' down to Texas for a big herd, an' figgers on comin' back this way with it. Perdue, this feller Dave Green is th' best-natured *hombre* you ever saw. Generous feller, he is. Ol' fren' of mine; an' a good un. Shake han's with him. You two boys oughta know each other better."

Fanning and Dave exchanged winks, and Perdue was trying to iron out a grin.

"Yes, sir; Dave's a generous soul," said Fanning. "He'd give you his shirt for a wagon cover, if it was plumb wore out. If you ever play poker with Dave, you'll shore as hell find out how generous he is." He raised his voice. "Hey, *Ben!* I'm tellin' this stranger how generous Dave is."

"Go ahead, young man; deal 'em out, from th' left to th' right," said Ben Dailey, and then raised up in his chair and looked at Fanning and his little party. "Dave generous?" he shouted over the noise. "Shore he is, but nobody's found it out yet. Don't you let 'em string you, Dave; you ain't losin' yore grip, a-tall. Yo're gettin' tighter every minute; an'," he added, sizing up Sherwood with one practised glance, "so is Lin. I'll take you fellers on to-night, after I get all these boys have."

"Perdue," said Dave, "Dailey loves his little poker game. If he was starvin', an' you offered him a choice between a big meal an' a game of poker, he'd grab for

th' deck. Win or lose, it don't make no difference, just so he's settin' in."

And so the merriment continued, the sweet coming before the bitter. One week later, the storm burst like a deluge, sweeping cattle away in herds and bunches, leaving dead and crippled men on the three Gunsight ranches. Sherwood fought for his life against his wounds, surrounded by his crippled outfit; Johnny Nelson, ambushed and left all night on the open range, tossed on his fevered bed and dictated a broken letter, which his wife smoothed before sending; in the bunkhouse, four of his men lay helpless; down on the Triangle the same scene hushed that ranch. The range was stricken by unexpected bolts out of the dark, merciless fury the keynote of the attacks. It was whipped before it knew the imminence of danger, its leading figures put out of action on the same night, and its uninjured men left dazed and hopeless. Johnny's forebodings had come true: Mr. Perdue, the pleasant stranger, had returned to Gunsight; but this time he came after dark, in the name of Nevada, the boss of Snake Buttes.

## CHAPTER III

### THE BAR 20 ANSWERS

UP IN Montana, on the Double Y ranch, Red Connors thumbed his nose at Skinny Thompson and swaggered toward the corral with a brand-new saddle on his shoulder, as proud as a boy with a new pair of red-topped boots.

"Stuck on hisself," drawled Skinny, peering out of the bunkhouse door. "Huh!"

"Allus was," commented Lanky Smith, gratis. "Hell! A saddle ain't no good till it's broke in a little. Like a new pair of boots, it is: not much good till it's near wore out."

"Sour grapes!" jeered Billy Williams. "Yo're near green with envy about it. Saw you lovin' it with both hands. Sour grapes!"

"Ain't neither!" retorted Lanky. "I was just feelin' of th' leather, I was. *Me* envious? I got a better one, ain't I?"

"Shucks," said Pete Wilson, a slow-witted giant, whose strength was proverbial. "I don't like them centre fires. Do *you*, Lanky?"

"A good rider don't care whether it's centre fire or rim fire," replied Lanky. "Of course, I don't blame

*you* for likin' a rim fire. You naturally need all th' blame cinches you can get."

"Couple extry stirrups would help Pete a lot," snickered Billy; "an' a couple of handles somewhere to hang hold of. There comes Hoppy with th' mail—not that it makes no difference to me, however."

"Got to know how to read before mail means anythin'," jibed Skinny. He peered through the doorway again. "Look at him wavin'! Mebby somethin's wrong, fellers; or mebby Tex, or Mesquite, is comin' back here."

"Mesquite ain't been gone long enough," grunted Lanky. "Tough luck, his mother dyin'. Good kid, he is."

"Somethin's wrong," said Skinny. "He's wavin' his hat!"

"Mebby Mesquite's cut his finger or stubbed his toe," growled Pete, a little jealous of the affection existing between the absent youth and the nearing rider.

"Shut up!" snapped Lanky. "No time to get funny when a man's gone back home to bury his mother. Ain't you got no sense, a-tall?"

"Never did have, an' never will have," said Billy, the pessimist.

"Not if I hang out in this outfit," grunted Pete.

Three quick shots rang out on the trail from town, and the inmates of the bunkhouse rushed the door, jammed in the opening, and spoke frankly and impolitely to each other as they tried to claw through it. Red dropped his new saddle and ran awkwardly to meet the racing horseman, behind whom now trailed thin wisps of



powder smoke. Skinny, because of his peculiar architecture, was the first to squirm through the doorway; and, once through, his zealous haste died promptly and he idly leaned against the bunkhouse wall.

"Huh!" he snorted in suspicious disgust. "Tryin' to run a blazer on us, I reckon."

"One of his fool jokes; there ain't nothin' wrong," growled Billy, pessimistically, leaning beside Skinny. "There ain't nothin' excitin' ever goin' to happen up here no more; an' if it does, I won't be let in on it. What's he hollerin'?"

They all listened intently, and soon the words could be made out.

"Free fight! Free fight! No holds barred, an' everybody in it!" came the words down the wind. They saw Red gain the trail, run with the horse, and swing himself up behind the rider. Then Red's gun spurted into the air and he began yelling something.

The suspicious line-up leaning against the wall moved forward, and then settled back again, grinning at this attempt to fool it.

"Free fight!" Hopalong Cassidy's words were plainer now. "Johnny's in trouble!"

The line-up reacted galvanically and filled the air with profanity, some of it weighted with ridicule. They seemed to have a deal of confidence in Johnny's ability to take care of himself. Still, you never could tell. The horse dashed up to the house and its riders swung down on opposite sides, Hopalong waving an opened letter.

"Johnny's in trouble! Shot to pieces, you damn fools!" he yelled. "Wants help!"

"Serves him right!" snapped Lanky. "When do we start?" His hand dropped to his gun.

"Pack yore war bags, fellers!" barked Skinny, his eyes blazing.

Hopalong jumped for him and Lanky, threw his arms around them, and went down in the sand with them. They wrestled furiously for a moment and then arose, simultaneously, and simultaneously spat sand and dust.

An anxious chorus was asking questions.

"What's th' matter?"

"Who's gougin' him?"

"Git th' time-table, Lanky!"

"Time-table? That's last winter's, you tumblebug. Where th' hell you been all spring?"

Billy Williams sneered openly.

"There ain't nothin' wrong with Johnny. It's another one of Hoppy's fool jokes."

"That so?" cried Hopalong, again waving the letter. "If you'll make less noise I'll read it to you!"

"All right; shut yore own face an' there'll be less noise," said Skinny, rubbing an abraded knee. "*Read it, why don't you?*"

Hopalong faced them, his eyes on the letter, and his eyes were cold.

"*"DEAR FRIENDS,"*" he read. "*"I wish I was on the old Bar 20, with the old crowd behind me. Every move I make is known. The same with my men. Sherwood and his boys have been whipped twice. Lost nearly half their cattle. Mine are going fast. It's*

Nevada and his gang, over in Snake Buttes. Need men that are not known down here. Where is Tex?

“If you fellows were not so damn fat and dumb I’d invite you all to a Colt fandango, with no holds barred. As it is, Nevada would slaughter you all with one hand. I’m still in the saddle, but shot up and slipping. Margaret and I both send our love to all of you. I may have to get a job working for Buck again, Lord help me. Good luck. JOHNNY.”

“Huh!” snorted Skinny in strong derision. “‘*Where’s Tex?*’ Of all th’ insultin’ letter I ever heard, that’s th’ worst! ‘*Where’s Tex?*’ ‘*Fat an’ dumb!*’ Oughta let him get licked. Come on: we can catch th’ evenin’ train!”

“Evenin’ train?” grunted Red. “Better get one goin’ th’ right way!”

“If we can get on to it we can make it go th’ right way! They can run backwards, can’t they?”

“Where you goin’, Lanky?” called Skinny suddenly.

“To get a roll of bills from under th’ mattress,” answered Lanky, “an’ my rifle. I’ll be ready in two shakes.”

“Roll of bills from yore wife’s stockin’, you mean!” jeered Pete.

“Wait a minute!” called Hopalong. “Come back here! We can’t all go, you flathead. Somebody’s got to stay here with Buck. We’ve got to draw lots.”

“Draw ’em yoreself,” derided Lanky. “I never had no luck drawin’ lots; an’ I’m goin’. Damn this country, anyhow! Th’ cactus an’ mesquite shore will look good to me ag’in.”

"Fine example of a married man, you are!" yelled Skinny. "Goin' off an' leavin' yore wife."

"Red left his for a year, didn't he?" demanded Lanky, walking back a few steps.

"He did," said Red. "What's more, I'm aimin' to repeat. She'd throw me out if I didn't try to help th' Kid."

"Well, so'd mine," growled Lanky.

"Who's killed?" demanded a new voice, and they saw their frowning foreman looking at them suspiciously. "What's th' matter with you idjuts, anyhow? Can't a man take a little nap on his own ranch without no war bustin' loose under his nose? What's th' matter with you?"

"Johnny's in trouble, Buck—big trouble," said Hopalong, holding out the letter.

Buck read it, turned it over, back again, and read it again.

"Huh!" he grunted, eyeing his outfit with vast suspicion. "Since when has th' Kid writ a nice hand like this? Look at it! *Look* at it!" he ordered, shoving it under his partner's nose. "What fool game are you all up to, anyhow, you fellers?"

"Margaret wrote that," explained Hopalong calmly. "You know he ain't touched a pen since he got married no more than *you* have. Th' Kid's in a lot of trouble, Buck, or he'd never let that letter be sent. He's got me worried."

"You know that Margaret would never swear like that if she writ this letter," retorted Buck, trying to guess the game. "There, see for yoreself. See that *damn*?"

"I betcha that little lady would swear worse than that if Johnny was in trouble," replied Red, his eyes sparkling. "Anyhow, *that* ain't swearin'."

The crowd emphatically agreed with him while Buck read their serious and anxious faces; and belief came to him suddenly. His eyes narrowed.

"Who-all are goin'?" he demanded. "I'm payin' th' fares an' all th' expenses. Glad to get rid of you for awhile, an' keep that cub from comin' up here to pester me. Who're goin'?"

Again the shouted answer made it unanimous, and again the foreman frowned; but it was an unfortunate frown, because it died even as it was born. Buck knew these men, knew what Johnny Nelson meant to them, and to him. They all had come up from the old ranch to help him out of trouble on this northern range; and they had succeeded. Now that Johnny was in trouble, it was only fair that they go back again and whip another range into submission. He was getting too old to be of any real use to them as an active participant in the game they would play; he doubted that he could hold the pace they would set. The least he could do was to send them where they were needed, and to train his old gun-hand to sign more checks.

"Yo're all loco," he told them, his eyes shining. "Let's get some sense. Before we say anythin' more, however, I'm sayin' that you all can go. Draw on me for everythin' you need till you get back. Johnny helped to save this ranch, an' it's all his if he needs it. Every last cow, every last acre! Where was Tex th' last time you heard from him?"



"You've got his address in th' back of yore account book," said Red. "Buck, yo're all right! Damn old square-shootin' hoss-thief! You can get some men from th' Cyclone to help you till we get back."

"Don't want no help!" blazed Buck, his face set to hide his emotions. "It's high time I quit takin' naps in th' daytime. Got to work some fat off me, an' from under my hat. Anyhow, this range is all fresh cleaned up ag'in, thanks to you boys. Porter's gang is busted up, an' most of 'em dead. Shanghai's near scared to death; but if he busts loose ag'in, I'll take th' old Sharps an' blow him apart. Set down ag'in that wall. We got to know what we're goin' to do before we start anythin'. Seems to me we got to act secret: what was it th' Kid said about them fellers knowin' everythin' he did?"

"Buck, I'm downright proud of you," said Hop-along. "This sounds like th' old Bar 20, damned if it don't; an' there's few things sweeter to this bunch than that. This is th' best thing that ever happened to you."

"Like gettin' rid of a crutch," muttered Billy, incautiously.

"Who's a crutch?" snapped Buck, pugnaciously. "Let me tell you, Billy, there wasn't never a day that I couldn't flop you on yore back an' hold you there; an' that day ain't come yet!"

"I said you was a crutch to any friend in trouble," explained Billy, and then turned swiftly to throttle Skinny's guffaw.

"Trouble with you, an' it goes for all th' rest of you, too," said Buck, glaring, "is that you been settin' around gettin' rusty. All you fellers been thinkin'



about, these days, is grub pile, an' bedtime. Make men of you ag'in, down there lickin' that Nevady feller: an' I'm tellin' you that you've got to lick him! I ain't what you might call bloodthirsty, but I want that toad's scalp! Hear me real plain?"

"Am I sober?" muttered Hopalong, hardly believing his ears.

"Yes, I'm sober!" snapped Buck, whirling. "An' I'm gettin' mad by th' minute! How do we know what's happened to th' Kid by this time? We don't even know that he's alive, right now!"

"If he ain't," growled Pete, "we'll pile up quite some few dead men on top of his grave to keep him company!" The tremendous muscles of his great arms threatened to burst the sleeves that covered them.

"Set down, I tell you!" ordered Buck. "How can anybody be heard in all this hell-a-baloo? That's better. Now then, what are we goin' to do, an' how? You first, Hoppy: got any idears?"

"He's full of 'em, such as they are," said Red, squirming.

"Shut up!" snapped Buck. "Got any idears, Hoppy?" he repeated.

"First thing is to telegraph Tex. Johnny asked for him special," said Hopalong, his eyes glowing. "Tex is worth a dozen men if he's let loose to play a lone hand. I know *him*. Then we got to let Johnny know that we're comin'. Next thing: we start."

"Keno," said Buck, nodding. "Write that telegram, an' we'll get it on its way."

"How long will it take us to get to Gunsight?" asked Skinny, eagerly.

"Months, mebby; we ain't goin' to Gunsight," answered Hopalong.

"What?" cried Skinny. "We ain't goin' to Gunsight? *Why* ain't we?"

"Shut yore face, Skinny, an' let a better head work," said his friend Billy.

"Better?" snorted Skinny, up in arms. "His wears a bigger hat; but so would a cow's! Why ain't we goin' to Gunsight?"

Hopalong looked at the curious faces, and smiled.

"Yore head's as good as anybody's, Skinny, only you never use it. If we go to Gunsight, them Snake Buttes coyotes will know us as well as they know Johnny. Th' Kid said he wanted th' old Bar 20 crowd: all right, he'll get it; an' what's more, he'll get th' old Bar 20 ways along with it. We never overlooked no bets, down there; an' we acted quick an' rough. This here Nevady feller has got somethin' headin' his way, but he shore ain't got no damn idear what it is! An' he ain't goin' to know till it hits him; an' then it'll be too late.

"First, we'll send word to Tex. Wait till I get a pencil," he said, and darted into the house. When he came out again, the noise subsided enough for him to be heard, and he forthwith read the message, and handed it to Billy. "Fork a good cayuse an' get that to th' railroad office, down in Wayback, *pronto!* Better wait right there for an answer, but be back before mornin'."

"Wait!" said Red, sharply. "You might use yore head a little more an' do it good, Hoppy. Better send Johnny's at th' same time. No use makin' two trips, is there? Th' Kid will be anxious to learn we're comin'."

"Like hell he will!" snapped Buck. "He knows us better'n that! He knows we're comin', an' comin' hard. But we might as well let him know."

"If folks quit wearin' hats, Red wouldn't have no use for his head," said Hopalong. "There ain't no message goin' to Johnny," he said, decisively.

Buck looked at him quickly and then smiled grimly.

"Yo're right, Hoppy!" he exclaimed. "No tellin' who might read a message sent to him. Remember what th' letter said? But he's goin' to get word about us comin', an' I'm goin' to figger out a way to do it. My G——d, I got it! I'll send it to him by word of mouth! I'll send a man down there to whisper it to him, an' to bring me back his answer." He chuckled. "Then I'll be shore that he's still alive."

"You mean yo're sendin' a man down there to say a few words to th' Kid an' then come back again?" asked Lanky, his eyes gleaming. "All th' way down there, an' back?"

"You remember, Lanky, when I sent men from around th' Bar 20 away up here to Montany for Frenchy McAllister, don't you? Sent 'em on hossback, too! If I could do that for myself, I can do this for th' Kid."

Lanky sprang to his feet, swinging his big hat around his head.

"Three cheers for th' old Bar 20! By G——d, Buck, I'm proud of you!"

"Nobody gives a damn who yo're proud of. *Set down!*" snapped Buck. He was becoming excited, his mention of the time he had sent for Frenchy McAllister stirring him deeply. He had called on many friends for that fight with Deacon Rankin and his crowd; and every last man had responded. His eyes sparkled and his hands opened and shut nervously. "Th' Kid said th' *old* Bar 20: well, he's gettin' it, flavour an' all! Damn it, but I wish I could go with you!" He faced Hopalong again, his hand going out to rest on his old friend's shoulder. "What else, Hoppy?" he asked.

"In th' first place," replied Hopalong, "you needn't send nobody to Johnny with no message. Telegraph to Mr. Wiggins, Highbank, an' he'll see that th' Kid gets th' news. He's Arch Wiggins' father. Now, then: th' Kid needs help right there on his range, an' we can't play that part; but we can see that he gets it. We can't go to Gunsight, or Highbank, Juniper, or Rawlins. When we hit th' Snake Buttes country we hit it from th' *other side*. That puts Nevady between two fires. What's more, he won't know that we are there, who we are, or anythin' about it till we tell him in powder smoke. He's asked for a fight, pickin' on th' Kid; an' I'm tellin' you that he's shore goin' to get one, damn him!"

Billy dashed up, mounted on the best horse on the ranch. The dust of his sudden stop swirled unnoticed in the faces of his friends.

"I'm off, Hoppy! Anythin' else?" he cried.

"Yes; wait a minute," flung Hopalong over his shoulder, as he once more darted into the bunkhouse. When he came out again, he handed two more messages to the waiting rider and waved him on his long ride to the telegraph office in Wayback.

"Who're they to?" asked Buck, puzzled about the third message.

"One is to Wiggins. It said: '*Tell Nelson we are comin. Bar 20.*' Th' other is to Waffles, good old Waffles, of th' O Bar O! You all remember that me an' Red saw him, down in Mesquite, when we bucked Kane that time? Waffles is workin' for Twitchell an' Carpenter, down in Sandy Bend, Texas. I'm goin' to Sandy Bend to talk to Waffles, an' I want to be shore that he'll be home when I get there. If I know him, an' I'll bet my last dollar that I do, I know what he'll do. Nevady won't be so all-fired happy one of these nights when he raids Johnny's cattle. Boys, I'm gettin' young ag'in. Th' old days are comin' back, an' comin' with a rush!"

"Gran'pa's quit settin' in th' shade an' whittlin'," chuckled Red. "What'd I tell you, back on th' Old Western Trail: didn't I say you'd never be able to take things easy? You called it 'settin' in th' shade an' whittlin'. Huh!"

"How can I, Red?" exulted Hopalong, tingling from his scalp to his toes. "Ain't I lost my knife?" He turned to the foreman and laughed. "Yo're shore goin' to have quite some payroll before *I* get through, Buck. You better stop me in time."

"Well, some of th' money will be yours, too; an'



we both got more than we know what to do with," answered Buck, grinning. "Ranch an' cattle free an' clear; but they'll be covered so deep with mortgages, if Johnny needs that much, that you won't be able to see a cow or an acre. It'll be worth that to keep him from raisin' hell up here!" His laughter boomed out, to reassure an anxious face in the ranchhouse window, where his wife waited to learn what ill news had come to the Double Y.

"All right," said Hopalong, and turned toward the others. "We take guns, saddles, tobacco, an' blankets. Everythin' else we'll buy when we leave th' last damn train. There's a train leavin' Wayback at two-ten to-morrow afternoon. We'll be on it, prayin' for speed."

"Wish I was goin' with you," grunted Buck, his face working. "Got a mind to, anyhow!" He paced to and fro to work off excess energy. Then he stopped and wheeled. "Hey! What did you say to Tex in that message?"

Hopalong chuckled, scratched his head, and spoke.

"I said: '*Johnny bein' licked to a frazzle. Needs help. Wants you. Is in great danger. Are you afraid of Nevady an' the Snake Buttes? We are all goin' by way of Sandy Bend. Will hit buttes from southwest. No holds barred. Answer quick.*'"

"Tex is a shore and quick guesser. He knows about Nevady an' th' Snake Buttes. Johnny sheltered Jane before Tex married her, an' would 'a' died before any harm come to her. I know Tex, through an' through!" He laughed exultantly, slapping his thigh. Then he

looked into his foreman's grinning face. "If Tex don't answer before we leave, send it on to me in care of Twitchell an' Carpenter, down in Sandy Bend."

"He'll answer it if he gets it in time," said Buck, unhesitatingly; "An' if I know Tex, he'll beat you to th' Snake Buttes. But what'll he do with his wife?"

"Reckon you can leave that with him," suggested Red.

"Serves him right for gettin' married," gloomily remarked Billy. He arose. "I can pack my war bag in three minutes, flat." He started toward an out-building. "I reckon you all want a gunny sack apiece?"

"Reckon we're goin' to carry our saddles on our heads?" sarcastically demanded Lanky. "Mind that you pick out th' best. There's some that are near wore out."

"I'm aimin' to pick out th' best," retorted Billy. "*One* of th' best, anyhow."

"Hey, Red," said Skinny, gravely innocent. "Ain't you scared that yore brand new saddle will get all wrinkled in a gunny sack?"

Red arose, pushed the speaker's hat down over his ears, and started after Billy to see that at least two good gunny sacks were picked out of the pile.

"I never should 'a' left th' Kid," growled Hopalong, walking with his foreman toward the ranchhouse, there to go into executive session and to plan, as far as possible, the line of campaign. Once he knew just what Tex would do, he could plan more closely.

Buck grunted non-committally and glanced off on the

plain, where two graves lay in the sunlight on a hillside. They covered his companion's wife and son, and most of his heart.

"What'll I tell that Mesquite cub when he comes back?" he asked.

"You tell him to stay right here on th' Double Y till I get back," said Hopalong, finding a little relief in the thought of this reinforcement for Buck. With Mesquite riding range, there were not many persons in that part of the country who would let their avarice lead them into raiding the ranch; and Buck was becoming the man he always had been before he had left the old Bar 20. Hopalong chuckled and glanced sidewise at his companion. "If Tex should send Jane up here while he's down in th' Snake Buttes country, you'll have quite a hen ranch, Buck."

Buck laughed, proudly.

"You bet, God bless 'em! Wish Johnny would send his wife up here,too. I ain't never met her, an' I reckon she'd be safer on th' Double Y."

"She shore would be safer; but she'll stick to th' SV an' th' Kid. She's as much a thoroughbred as he is."

"Wish I was goin' with you," muttered Buck, and turned his head quickly away.

Hopalong silently opened the ranchhouse door and led the way inside.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE LAST NIGHT

LIGHTS gleamed in the windows of the little houses on the Double Y, where married men were trying to smooth the way for their forthcoming departures. Up in the main building, Rose Peters was writing a cordial invitation for Margaret Nelson to visit her until the far away southern range was harmless again. She would give this to Hopalong, hoping he would pass it on to Waffles for personal delivery. A crescent moon in a clear sky faintly silvered the corrals and various roofs, barely revealing an indistinct bulk on the horizon, where the distant mountains raised their heads heavenward. The bunkhouse was dark, but a low murmur of conversation arose within it, an apparently casual and innocent conversation, sounding as peaceful as the soft night noises, and in no way out of tune with the quiet range. Yet a close listener would have been surprised by the direct grimness of it, perhaps shocked a little by the calm planning of what was intended to be a campaign of cold killing.

Detail by detail arose, was discussed, and put behind in the class of decided things. Strategy and counter strategy were built up and dissected, rebuilt, and dissected again. Pete occasionally added a word, but

mostly sat absorbing what he listened to, his grim face lost in the shielding dark. When Hopalong and Buck planned warfare he was content to listen and to admire.

A low sound, throbbing far off on the range, like the muffled beating of a drum, grew gradually louder until it challenged attention. The talkers stopped, listened, and went on again. Pete slowly and ponderously arose and lounged to the open door, where he peered into the glowing night and waited. Somehow, there came to his slow mind a picture of fast-riding raiders, in a land different from this. Cacti, mesquite, Spanish bayonet, and yuccas made a picture he was well familiar with. For a stolid man, this dreaming was strange; and for a stolid man his great hands opened and shut in a surprisingly significant movement. Somewhere in the great Southwest, such raiders, even then, might be riding. He tightened his jaws, and then relaxed. All right: two could play at raiding, and to him and his friends there was nothing new in such a game. It would be only a question of motive and ability. He shook his head as though to banish the picture, and again peered into the faintly lighted night, eager to welcome the returning Billy and what news he might have. The distant hoofbeats died out for a moment and then slowly swelled in sound again. Pete could see the swampy ground in that hollow between the ridges, and the changing timbre of the rolling beats let him place the rider. Stirring, he turned and looked back into the room, where the glowing tip of a cigarette located the consulting strategists.



"Billy, I reckon," he grunted, and faced forward again.

In reply a box scraped over the sand and planks, followed by the more modest scrape of a chair. The strategists stalked to the doorway, Pete stepping outside to give them room. The foremost of the two glanced at the lights in the little houses at the left of the big ranchhouse.

"Tough on th' wimmenfolk," he said, thoughtfully. "Good thing th' boys married winners."

"Yes, to both," said his companion, watching the distant doors open as the rolling tattoo of the nearing horseman gained attention in the married quarters. In each rectangular blot of light was silhouetted the figure of a man, and in an instant each figure doubled and became two. "Not one of them wimmen would stand in th' way of helpin' Johnny. They used to wrangle him when he was up here, but he ain't got no better friends when he's in trouble. Seems to me that Billy's made right good time."

"Yes—I reckon he didn't get no answers," said the other.

"Not enough time, mebby. We'll run into 'em at Wayback in th' mornin'," said Hopalong.

Now the horseman could be picked out as he swung down the little divide just beyond the farthest corral. The three men in the bunkhouse looked inquiringly at each other. They all had known, before this, that the coming horse was not the one Billy had ridden from the ranch. Their ears had told them that. The unspoken question in their glances was answered by

Hopalong, who pushed away from the doorway and then stopped.

"Swapped at Sandy's," he said, referring to the hotel keeper in Twin River. Two confirmatory grunts sounded in his ears. "Sandy gave him his best."

A racing shadow swept along the corral fence, moved out into the lighter open, and straightened out for the bunkhouse. The figures in the distant houses now divided suddenly, and running men started across the ground.

The bay horse slid to a stop, his breath whistling through distended nostrils. Billy leaped to the ground, stumbled, caught himself, and laughed.

"Got 'em," he said. "Got th' answers," and he held out two flimsy envelopes to his foreman.

"You don't mean it!" exclaimed Buck, staring foolishly at the missives in his hand.

"Yeah. Both come nearly at once. I've wore out four cayuses since I left here. Sandy growled like a mad she-bear, but, like Sandy, gave me his pet. I'm goin' to buy that cayuse when I get back: rides like a rockin' chair."

The flare of a match sent a thin streak of stinking sulphur through the doorway, and the sputter of a protesting wick died suddenly as the room grew light. Pete pushed the lamp to the exact centre of the table and looked inquiringly toward the door.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Buck, turning. He opened the messages and leaned down close to the smoking lamp, struggling with the handwriting of an operator whose schooling had been too much with rope

and branding iron. Slowly he spelled out each word, unconscious of the tenseness of his companions, their distressed eagerness:

*“‘Buck Peters,*

*Double Y,*

*Twin River, Mont.*

*“‘Leaving to-day for the south. Sending Jane to you. See boys in buttes. Beat them by a week. Be in bad company. Do not shoot me.*

*“‘TEX’”.*

Buck cleared his throat.

“Bet he’ll beat you; but what’s he mean about bein’ in bad company?”

Hopalong laughed and slapped his companions on their broad backs, slapped enthusiastically, with all his welling pride and exuberant glee.

“Don’t you know?” he shouted, his voice roaring in the room. “I’ll tell you in a minute. Read th’ other!”

Buck leaned down again, and again came the slow and painful spelling of the message:

*“‘Hopalong Cassidy,*

*Double Y,*

*Twin River, Mont.*

*“‘Come a-running. I’ll be here.*

*“‘WAFFLES.’”*

Hopalong straightened up, one clenched fist going up above his head. He thrilled as he had not thrilled for months, and his voice broke from pride and pleasure.

"Two innocent telegrams, Buck; but they shore spell trouble for Nevady. I knowed they'd make good, *both* of 'em! I *knowed* it! Good old Tex! Good old Waffles!"

Pounding steps raced toward the house, and in a moment three heavily breathing men dashed through the doorway, asking questions, and redoubling the noise as they shouted exultantly. The telegrams passed from hand to hand and back again, with the clamour going higher.

Pete's great voice boomed out above the uproar, in a song which in the old days had been Johnny Nelson's favourite when feeling gay:

"A-down th' road, an' gun in hand,  
Comes Whisky Bill, mad Whisky Bill;  
A-lookin' for some place to land,  
Comes Whisky Bill.  
An' everybody'd like to be  
Ten miles away, behind a tree,  
When on his joyous, achin' spree  
Starts Whisky Bil-l-l."

Pete flung his great arms up, his hands appealingly aloft.

"Come on, *everybody*: *sing*, you sinners, *sing!*"

He need not have extended his invitation, for everybody was singing, at the tops of their straining voices. They were a little out of time, and very much out of pitch, but the result was very striking and lacked nothing in volume because of this.

“Th’ times have changed since you made love,  
O, Whisky Bill, O Whisky Bill.  
Th’ happy sun grinned up above  
At Whisky Bill.  
An’ down th’ middle of th’ street,  
Th’ sheriff comes on toe-in feet,  
A-wishin’ for one fretful peek  
At Whisky Bil-l-l.”

“*Louder* on th’ last verse, fellers!” shouted Pete.  
“*Stamp* her out, heels *hard*!”

“Th’ cows go grazin’ o’er th’ lea—  
Pore Whisky Bill, pore Whisky Bill!  
An’ achin’ thoughts pour in on me  
Of Whisky Bill.  
Th’ sheriff up an’ found his stride,  
Bill’s soul went shootin’ down th’ slide—  
How *are* things on th’ Great Divide,  
O Whisky Bil-l-l?”

“My G——d!” said Buck, hands to ears, trying not to choke from the dust which filled the room in clouds. “My G——d! If Nevady heard that he’d never stop runnin’! Boys, we’re all goin’ back a long, long time to-night. Will you ever forget those grand old days? Hah! I tell you!”

“Tex was on th’ other side, then,” said Red thoughtfully. “Now he’s with us, all th’ way, clean to th’ very end, no matter how bitter it may be. But what does he mean there, where he say’s he’ll be in bad company?”



"You got a head like a cow; a dead cow," cried Hop-along. "Don't you know that long-headed son of a gun well enough by this time to know what he means? Ain't there only one bad crowd down there that we got any interest in right now? Can't you guess it? Think man, *think!*"

They could, and did guess it, all but Pete; and they guessed it at the same time, sending another shout to roll across the range. Pete still looked doubtful, and worked slowly over to Buck's side.

"What's Tex mean, Buck?" he asked, cautiously.

"He's goin' in th' buttes alone an' try to join that gang," answered Buck, proudly. "Don't you worry about Tex, Pete; he's got a plenty of brains, an' he'll use 'em every minute of th' long, long day."

"Gosh!" muttered Pete. "Gawd help Nevady!"

"He'll need all th' help he can get!" replied Buck, savagely.

"How'bout a dance before we go?" shouted some cheerful soul, and the words fell on fertile ground. Pete grinned and stepped through the doorway and cupped his hands before his lips. Then his bellowed summons crashed across the range and reached into the farthest house. Rose Peters heard it unbelievably; but she threw a shawl over her head and stepped forth into the shining night, fighting back a mad and foolish urge to cry. A farewell dance, a night of revelry, and then a long journey which easily might end in death and heavy sorrow. Strange creatures, these men; strange, indeed; but, oh, so loyal! She choked, but fought it back, stopped to glance at the little houses to

her right and to wait for the hurrying wives who came swiftly enough, but in a strange silence. A suppressed sob struck her ears, and she stepped forward impulsively but checked herself. The dance must go on, and the smiles must be unmarred by tears. Sympathy now might spoil it all. They must smile and dance, for it was the woman's way.

## CHAPTER V

### THE LEOPARD RESUMES ITS SPOTS

CONNECTED events were occurring almost simultaneously in different parts of the country. At the little hamlet of McKenzie the foreman of the UX waited on the station platform for the eastbound accommodation, since no other train even hesitated at this humble collection of four buildings. His wife sat on her small trunk, trying to be brave, to keep her face shining although her heart was dull. Somehow, it was not so much the danger in itself that worried her, for she had vivid memories of dangers passed through when her husband faced, almost alone, a hostile town; and she gathered from his remarks that there would be little danger for him to face in the part he had elected to play. He would not be with the fighting force. Of this he had assured her. So it was not so much the danger as it was the distance which would separate them, and the knowledge that he could not write to her. The sum of these things made a total which punished her cruelly. Why couldn't she have gone down to Margaret Nelson, to give courage, and to receive it? She looked up, and smiled.

"Dear, if you need your heavier flannels, there is one suit at the bottom of the valise. I know what you said,

but thought it better to put it in, anyway. There was plenty of room for it."

Tex Ewalt, willingly on his way to grin at Death at close range, rested his hand on her shoulder, not knowing how close he came to starting tears which needed only slight encouragement.

"Glad you thought of them, Jane; they'll come in handy. If there is no one to meet you at Wayback, go to Cozzen's stables, tell them who you are, and have them drive you to the Double Y." He chuckled. "But I'm bettin' old Buck will be on hand an hour before train time."

"I'm half sorry that I am not going to stay with Jerry," she cogitated, thinking that, in her ministrations to her brother, she would have less time to worry.

Tex was very patient in this revival of a matter already argued and settled.

"But, you know, Jerry is roughing it high up in the hills, where his lungs will have a chance to heal," he said, sitting down beside her. "A sheep camp is no place for a woman. You would only complicate things for him, and be the most lonely woman on earth."

He did not tell her that Jerry's attempt to find a cure was a dangerous one; that a sheep herder in that part of the country not only was considered to be the lowest of human beings, but lived in a constant danger zone, and one which moved as he moved. Tex, himself, had a wholesome contempt for Jerry's calling; but, knowing the circumstances, he excused his brother-in-law's choice. The man could not stand the hard riding of the ranges and was too proud to live on the earnings of

others. Sheep herder or not, Jerry had good stuff in him.

"Up there on the Double Y," he continued, "you'll have company of your own sex, you'll find Buck Peters the kindest man you every knew, and in twenty-four hours' time you'll be worshipping at Rose Peters' feet." He playfully pulled her ear. "It's a good thing for you, young lady, that Buck saw her first!"

The rails clicked softly, and a smudge of smoke spoiled the view over the curving hills west of the hamlet.

"I won't be gone long, dear; not with that crowd hammering in their old-time way," he assured her. "As I said, there is very little danger for me. For them it is different. Before fall settles down on this range we'll be back again, laughing at all this. Give my letter to Buck: he'll know what to do with it. Only hope it gets there in time to catch Hopalong. Here she comes, limping, as usual."

He was right. The short, ugly train swung around the curve and seemed to stop with gratitude. Tex picked up the trunk, heaved it into the combination forward car, and then helped his wife up the dusty, grimy steps of the car next to it, where a wailing infant did its best to complete an already dispirited atmosphere.

"Keep an eye on her, Captain," said Tex to the brakeman, slyly shaking hands with the train man. "Put her off at Wayback, trunk an' all."

The brakeman slid his hand into his pocket and brought it out empty.

"Off she goes at Wayback, stranger, if it takes th'

hull train crew. Thanks." He grinned, glanced at the conductor, and swung on board. "Trunk an' all," he said.

A shudder passed down the cars, chains rattled, and one flat wheel began its maddening, monotonous *whack, whack, whack*. A small white handkerchief fluttered from an open window, a brave little handkerchief which would neither be white nor dry for long. The sombrero in Tex's hand waved energetically, and continued to wave in diminishing rhythm until the last car swung from sight in the grey yellow cut.

He stopped abruptly, glanced around with a feeling of guilt, and slammed the hat on his head. The station agent locked the door of the little office and emerged, eager to get back to his ploughing. Catching sight of the lone and lonely puncher, he grinned knowingly and walked that way.

"Kinda tough, th' first time," he said, kindly. "Couple years more an' you'll give three hearty cheers when she goes visitin'. Take my word for that. Busy out at the ranch?"

"Same as usual. Heard anythin' recent about Number Ten?"

"Seventeen minutes late. You takin' her?"

"If she gets here, I aim to."

"Why didn't you say so before I locked th' office?" asked the station agent reprovingly, as he reluctantly pulled out his keys. "You might as well get yore ticket now, I reckon, an' be all ready for her."

"No hurry; I can wait till you come back," replied Tex.



"Goin' far?"

"Salt Lake City," lied Tex. He thought that he might as well keep in practice, seeing that he had begun already in his reassuring remarks to his wife; and, besides, he was giving out no information. He grinned. "Aim to find me a job, herdin' sheep."

The agent's jaw dropped and he studied his companion, his face blank from surprise. Then a grin stole over it.

"Yeah, reckon so," he drawled. "Yo're th' kind that takes to herdin' them damn things—with a gun." Another change of expression wiped off the grin. "Ain't figgerin' on visitin' that Jerry feller, are you?" The agent had forgotten that this man's brother-in-law was now a sheep herder.

"You never can tell what a man'll do when he gets out of th' hobbles of matrimony," said Tex. "There's worse things than herdin' sheep." In his mind he was checking off several of these, taking them from the memory of his own earlier days.

"Mebby—that is, I reckon so," muttered the agent, feeling that he had blundered. "Well, good luck. I got to get back to my ploughin'." He shuffled off, paused to fling reassurance over his shoulder about having the ticket window open in time, and went on again at a swifter pace.

The agent did get the ticket window open in time, a ticket to the Junction was purchased, the train came in a good half hour to the bad, and went on again, with Tex Ewalt in the smoker, where he settled himself comfortably in an atmosphere which smelled of Indians

and strong tobacco, drew his hat down over his eyes, and began to plan rather an intricate course of action. The miles went past unheeded until the Junction was reached. As the train was late, the usual hour between the westbound and the southbound trains was reduced to fifteen minutes; but this was time enough to eat a meal and get another ticket. Southbound now, on a limited train, Tex had a compartment to himself where he could practise steadily with a deck of cards, and again he became oblivious to the clicking miles; and with each mile put rearward his face seemed to change, to grow cynically hard and appraising. He had a part to play, which once had been more than a part; he had to go in thought and action and looks back into the years when not a prowling wolf had been as cold, as unthinkingly cruel, as cunning as this same Tex Ewalt. Having once lived the part and breathed it every waking hour, his task would not be difficult. As a fillip to his acting, his life would be at stake, and his life, nowadays, was a very precious thing. Before Jane had come into it——He checked himself with a grunt. This was not good for his acting.

Many weary hours had dragged their punishing lengths before Denver came into sight, snuggling cozily under a distant line of snow-clad peaks and rugged mountain sides. In the several years which had elapsed since Tex had walked on its streets, many changes had taken place in Denver, the most noticeable being its increase in size and the better class of buildings which now fenced in its avenues. He wondered if he had lost touch with those things which he now needed, and a

vague dismay troubled him for a moment. Ignoring the better part of town, he sought out one street unerringly, and breathed gently in relief as one certain building caught his eye. This was reassuring: at any rate, the building was still there, and its windows were filled with all of the old-time litter.

He entered the building and rested his arms on a counter, watching the shuffling figure come toward him from the little door in the partition in the rear. Tex remembered that at one time that door and the partition had been very much stronger than they appeared to be; and he remembered the heavy bars in the rear windows. The old man had aged greatly in the last few years, and he still wore the same old thick lenses in his spectacles.

"Howdy," said Tex, smiling a little. "Got any factory sorts an' strippers?"

The proprietor raised his hands and shook his head.

"Vot language is dot? Factory sorts und strippers? Vot you mean?" He looked to be mildly indignant, as though suspecting that he was being made fun of.

"I lost my outfit," explained Tex. "Got to get a new one. Never did care for shade work, or artificial markings; and wedges are too risky in th' company I'll be in. Even taking a big chance with strippers, although I ain't plannin' to use 'em. Some wise fool will discover 'em, steal 'em, an' get me into a heavy game, thinkin' he's disarmed me by stealin' my tools."

"Mister," said the proprietor, coldly, "your business ain't my business. I care noddin' for vot company you ged in. Vy shouldt I? Speak English und I

understand id; I make noddin' out of vot you say."

"How come yo're still doin' business here?" asked Tex, perfectly at home. "Reckon you'd been jailed or chased out of town long before this." Carelessly, he had turned his hands until the balls of his fingers could be seen by his companion, whose gaze instantly settled on them. The old man got closer to them, and their effect on him was positive. He became even more hostile and cold. If they thought to trap him, they would have to send in some man whose fingers did not bear the signs of toil; whose hands and face and neck were not browned to a copper-walnut colour by winds and sun. They must have a dumber crowd up at headquarters than even he had thought. The old eyes behind the thick lenses became cunning, not veiling the suspicion in the old head.

"Subbose you say vot you vant, mister? I am busy."

"I've already told you what I want," said Tex, and then he added one more word, in so low a voice that it barely carried across the counter.

The old eyes widened, slowly losing their hostility. A look of wonder and doubt crossed the wrinkled face.

"Id iss nod so," muttered the proprietor. Then he leaned far across the counter, peering suspiciously into the face now close to his own. "*Ach!*" he exclaimed. "Id iss Tex! Vere haf you been all dis time? How come dose hard fingers, dot tan? You haf nod been in chail or you would be vite *und* soft. Glad I am to see you, Tex! Vait, I show you some factory sorts as vill please efen you. *Ach, Gott*, der time as has passed!"

The old man beckoned and led his customer through

the small door in the partition, locking it behind them and shooting two massive bolts. He turned and passed his hands across his caller's shoulders, holding the arms affectionately as he peered happily into the sun-browned face.

"*Ach*, Tex, glad I am to see you vunce more. So glad you do nod know. I thought you deadt." He chuckled and stepped back, to admire a more complete figure and rubbed his hands in satisfaction. "Still lean, still hard, mine friendt. But vot haf you done mit dose *wunderbare* fingers, eh? You haf ruint dem, vich is a pidy."

"Oh, no; they'll come back to form," said the smiling owner of the fingers. "I've been earning an honest living with horse an' rope, Professor. But, from the sheer love of dexterity, I have never stopped practising. Now I am going to make an easier living."

"Und a goot vun, if you can get back again. A goot vun: *ach*, no man could make a *besser*. Vait, let me show you."

Tex watched him climb to the topmost shelf and helped him down with a box. Odds and ends came out of it, tarnished jewellery, so called; a loading tool, a pair of cheap and dented field glasses, parts of watches, old knives. From the bottom of the box, the old man lifted up a tightly wrapped package, handling it affectionately, as a music master might handle a rare old violin.

"Dese gamblers now haf no use for cards like dese," he mourned. "Dey are bunglers, always vanting markers. Vy, I sell more hold-oudts as you would pelief! Vot chance has a man god ven caught mid hold-oudts,



or line-vork, or shade vork? He has none, vatefer. Look, mine friendt; look vonce at dese!" He untied the string with eagerly trembling hands and gave Tex a pack of cards, sealed as they had been when they left the factory. "Vait, led me open dot seal; I fear dose fingers, mine friendt: dey look so clumsy, vot?"

Tex spread the deck across the table in one swift flourish, bending low to scrutinize the ends of the criss-cross markings, moving his head to catch the right light reflected from the glazed surfaces. There were no dull spots to be found: no acid had touched the backs. Swiftly he sorted out four piles of four cards each, and then turned them over, face up. Aces, Kings, Queens, and Jacks lay exposed, each in its own group. He flexed his fingers and wiped them on a towel to make certain that perspiration and dirt should not stain such tools. Swiftly bunching the deck, he shuffled, cut, dealt; scooped them up and repeated the actions, the old German's eyes close to the swiftly moving hands.

"*Ach*, you can do it!" exclaimed the old man, gleefully. "You can come back vonce more. You are *besser*, efen now, dan 'most any man in town!"

He took the cards from Tex's hand and put them back in the box, refixing the seal.

"From two dozen packs, und more, dese cards vere sorted. Dey are perfect. Dey can be examined mit a glass, und nodding show. Dere is nodding dere to see, vot? Subbose id is seen dot dose diamont markings are crossed der same, in efery group, by der vite border? Are you to be blamed for dot? *Nein*. Dey are from der factory sent oudt like dot!"



Tex nodded, for the cards had not been touched, not altered. They were just as they had come from the press; but they had been artfully selected.

"What was th' idea of keepin' 'em in that box, up on th' top shelf?"

"Oudt of der vay. Noboddy wants dem. I put dem away, like in a tomb. Dese gamblers, now, go look for suckers, und suckers are idiots. Anything vill do for a sucker. If he iss drunk, den so much der *besser*. Times haf changed, mine friendt; times haf changed. But now, *ach*, I could laugh. *Der grosser* volf he iss come back to prey on volves: but, *besser* you first fix dose finger tips; *besser* you do dot. Ha-ha-ha! *Der Meister ist wieder zurück gekommen.*" He chuckled down in his throat and began to paw around on a shelf holding bottles. "Here id iss; take it mid you, Tex. Vun veek like der bottle says, und vour fingers are goot again."

"What's th' price for th' cards?" asked Tex.

"Prices, too, haf changed. Vonce——" the old man raised his hands expressively. "Dey are no goot for me no more. Take der six packs for *zwelf* dollar. Iss id fair?"

"More than fair. Toss you, double or quits," said Tex.

"*Ach*, he iss back already! *Nein, nein*. I do nod gamble." He beamed at a sudden thought. "Did you see dot der packs are all different on der backs, in case you shouldt vant to plant dem? A goot choice of pattern, *hein?*"

"How could I, when you only showed me one pack?"

asked Tex, laughing as he counted out the money. He patted the old man on the shoulder and faced the locked and bolted door.

"*Ach*, he wants to double me or quits! Already he iss back again!"

"I was just practisin', Professor; just gettin' back in harness. I'll be back inside th' week, an' I want you to fix me up a travellin' layout. Make it tin-horn, cheap an' well worn. Shells an' peas, with a little shoe-maker's wax. Three-card spread, an' all that. You know what I need. I'm going up in th' gulches an' want to be ready for whatever happens to strike their fancy. Got to make a stake before I can tackle th' wolves here in town."

"Yah; I know. Und *besser* you shouldt practise, efen before you go in der gulches."

"I'm figgerin' to lock myself up in a hotel room an' practise till I can't see th' cards. All right, Professor. What you say I come in to-morrow mornin' early? I just thought of something."

The old man nodded and let him out, following him to the street door, and peered down the street after him. Rubbing his hands, he went back behind the counter, chuckling contentedly. What a panic there would be in town, among a certain class, when Tex Ewalt returned from his tour of the gulches with a stake and his old-time dexterity, to trim the sucker-trimmers!

"Ha-ha-ha! Vot a time dere will be! *Ach*, Tex, id iss like you come back from der grave. Now I make me dot oudtfut, so careful, so perfect. Like old times id iss, vonce more."

Tex stepped into a bookshop, bought a map or two, and went on to a small and dingy hotel. Here he locked himself in his room and practised at second dealing, false shuffling, location, false cutting, butting the cards, and switching the cut, stopping only to eat. The maps memorized, he burned them.

The following morning, he returned to the pawnshop, examined the gambling layout, smiled a little when he picked up and looked at the small pocket magnifying glass. He flashed an inquiring glance at the old pawnbroker. The glass was one of the common single lens, held in a horn ring, and pivoting into a horn cover.

"*Acb*, I meant to speak of dot," said the old man, quickly. "Dot shouldt nod be in dere mid dose others. You should carry id your pocket in."

Tex was about to toss it on the counter, but the eager, friendly face beaming at him made him change the direction of his hand and slip the small glass into a pocket, with a wide and comical gesture.

"Great things, these magnifiers," he said, to please the old man. "Never can tell when you'll want one," he added, keeping his face grave, and giving no hint of the laughter within him. He did not know how handy that little glass would be, how it was going to save him from dangerous suspicion; and at the same time let him play a trump card that would have nothing to do with gaming.

"You should nefer be midoudt dot," said the pawnbroker, shaking his head. "It vill show you things quickly on der backs of cards vot might take you too long to find midoudt id." He held out his hands.

"Now let me see dose fingers, Tex; let me look vonce at dem."

Tex chuckled and obeyed, smiling as the old head bent over them, and the old hands felt of them. To the pressure of the pawnbroker's testing touch, the thin skin on the tips of Tex's fingers became white and then flashed red as the blood returned.

"Purty goot; purty goot; dey could be *besser*, *aber* dey are goot enough." The old man dropped the fingers and smiled, his own hands now busy in repacking the little outfit. "Until I see you again, mine friendt, goot luck." He raised an admonishing, gnarled finger. "See dot you practise efery time dot you get der chance; und then, ven you come back to Denfer—*ach*, dot vill be a great joke, *nein?*"

"Th' joke will start before then," said Tex, smiling. "I'll have th' old-time skill long before I see Denver again." He picked up the layout, put it in his valise, shook hands heartily with the old man, and went on his way again, stepping once and for all out of the pawnbroker's life.

Dressed in the most approved make-up of the tin-horn gambler, so friendly and affable that he went out of his way to make the acquaintance of strangers, with a renewed stock of stories and an all-wise smile, he passed by the distant gulches, content to view them at long range from the vantage point of a smoking-car window. Down the valley of the Boiling Spring River, with its bulwarks of rocky peaks on the west, and the high, rolling prairies on the east, finding and leaving and again finding the wide and shallow river and its golden beds

of sand and gravel below its high, steep banks; down to the mercurial Arkansas and its generous sandbars, he made his way. A change of cars and he was gone again, steadily climbing higher out of the gentle valley of the larger river. Dry creek beds paralleled the tracks and flirted with the rails, and an occasional hollow roar told of small bridges. The imprisoning hills to the east and west drew steadily nearer to the glistening track, and now there began to appear rocky and broken ridges.

Mile after mile he drew steadily nearer to the still distant territory he had chosen for the most desperate game of all the games in his eventful life. Travelling, he found, cost him nothing; although he was content with modest winnings and honest winnings. Not once was a seal broken on any of the packs of cards at the bottom of the old valise. Suckers he milked gently, if he believed they could afford it, scorning to take advantage of even the slightest trick. It was a maxim of his that honesty was the best policy for a man whose poker-playing ability was as great as his own, and as long as an opponent played honestly the game remained on that basis. Only once did he have to exert himself against a man of his own mettle, and if this affable stranger had been content to play fairly, he would have been much better off. A substituted deck of shaded cards spelled its owner's defeat, for Tex learned them quickly and used them to his own advantage. The outcome of this keen encounter gave Tex a satisfaction greater than the worth-while winnings warranted. He had passed a critical test in a tense four-hour duel with a professional in the game—passed with honours, and



was now content. Rendered desperate, the stranger had added crimps, so faint that even he had trouble to distinguish them; and to his disgust had found that the deuces and trays soon bore the same marks. The other players did not lose much, but the professional was nearly stripped.

Changing cars twice, both times for a more disreputable train, Tex at last left trains behind him, sighed with relief, and walked jauntily toward an adobe livery barn. The horse he selected was a showy animal, but well bottomed. Its jet-black coat improved remarkably with attention, and soon fairly shone. Once in the old and comfortable second hand saddle, his modest effects in well-worn saddle bags, a flat and double-barrelled Derringer of heavy calibre in its shoulder holster, he left the little hamlet and rode eastward, cheerily whistling. In the slicker roll behind him was one of his favourite long-barrelled Colts; the other lay along his thigh, covered by the generous skirt of his black frock coat. Before him, although many miles away, were the Snake Buttes with their nest of human snakes; halfway was the domicile, in a little border town, of an old acquaintance of his predatory days. Should he find that acquaintance alive and at home, he had no doubt about the value of the information he would obtain. Toward them both rode Tex Ewalt, one hundred seventy pounds of dynamite clothed in a plain frock coat and gaudy vest; as wise and cold and unemotional as his class is supposed to be; cruel and direct and unwavering, as behove an expert two-gun man, and as merciless as both.



His riding and camping had no particular interest for any one but himself, and we will pass it by, being content to enter the little town of Ojos Verdes with him, and ride along its main and ugly street. A few dry-farmers were scattered about this hamlet, there were modest but questionable cattle outfits in the hills, and a number of prospectors made the town their spending and outfitting centre.

Straight for the largest and the only frame building in town rode Tex, and when he entered this temple of chance, he passed straight toward a table in a far corner, where a lean, tall man half dozed in lazy reflection.

"Howdy, Ben," said the newcomer, drawing back a chair and sinking into it.

Ben looked at him for a moment, and recognition slowly dawned. He sat erect and grudgingly shoved out a soft white hand.

"Tex Ewalt, by all that's holy!"

"Th' same," admitted Tex, smiling. "I'm lookin' for suckers, Ben; but mostly I'm lookin' for th' best way to get through th' buttes country east of here. Thought you might be able to tell me somethin' about it."

"I been close-herdin' th' few suckers hereabouts," said Ben, experimentally. "You driftin' back to yore old stampin' ground?"

"I don't aim to bother you a-tall," said Tex, reassuringly. "Yes, Ben; I'm driftin' back."

"I heard that you'd reformed," said Ben, watching closely through narrowed lids. "Heard you quit th' life."

Tex laughed, leaned back, and shoved his legs out in front of him.

"It's a purty good play, Ben; 'specially after a feller gets too well known. I was near starvin', for awhile. Every time I drifted near a card table th' silence became cold an' oppressive. Everybody seemed to know me. I had to do somethin', so I reformed. When th' crop got ripe I picked it clean, an' moved on a couple hundred miles to reform ag'in. That was slow work, Ben; you just can't reckon how suspicious folks are. There ain't no money in cards for me, no more, an' I'm gettin' tired of 'em. I used to know some fellers, back where I come from, that made out real well with cattle. If they ain't been killed off, jailed, or scattered, I aim to look 'em up." He smiled innocently. "Th' sooner I get on my way ag'in, th' better I'll like it. I ain't none too well healed."

Ben did not like to hear poverty spoken of, and poverty coupled to a man like Tex Ewalt hurt him to the quick. The small population in and around Ojos Verdes supported him well enough, since his wants were modest; but it would not support himself and a gambler like the man he now faced. In fact, it was possible that he might have to go to work, if this man remained. There was something else: he had never forgotten or forgiven a certain game in which Tex Ewalt had stripped him to his hat and clothes. Tex was going to ride through the Snake Buttes country, and in the buttes was Nevada's gang. Ben had suffered, quite recently, from this gang, and had found himself stripped again to his hat and clothes. This time it had been

done at the muzzle of a gun, and his anger still burned.

"That country has been gettin' civilized right fast th' last half dozen years," he said. "Th' cattlemen are workin' together, fences have gone up, trails have been closed, brands are checked, an' th' country is full of farmers. You feel that you got to go back there?"

"No-o—reckon not," said Tex slowly, his face expressing poorly hidden disappointment. "I figgered on it because I didn't know nothin' better. Got all out of touch with th' Southwest. I'm sorta lost, Ben, an' I don't want to open up no game *here*."

Ben nodded and smiled.

"I reckoned you was out of touch, speakin' so hopeful that way about th' old ranges." He was studying the calm and friendly face across the table from him, studying it intently. "Feel like gamblin', with cattle, for big stakes?" he asked.

"You forget what I said?"

"No; but I don't know just how far you want to go. Th' game I'm thinkin' about is mighty dangerous, *two* ways. You used to have plenty of nerve. Have you still got it?"

As Tex considered this question, he stiffened and his eyes grew hard. He looked his companion squarely in the face until that person became a little uncomfortable.

"I reckon I still got enough for anythin' *you* can think of. What you drivin' at?"

Ben slowly raised his lanky length from the chair and revealed the reason why men called him Long Ben.

"Come in that room with me, where we can talk plain'

an' not be bothered by any fool that might come in. I'm aimin' to put you on to somethin' good, but cussed risky. You say yore nerve's good enough: all right. If I do put you on to a good game, I want to hear you tell me that you'll keep yore hands off th' cards in this town, now an' for ever. Is it a bargain?"

Tex maintained his poker face. He had not forgotten that Ben had threatened to get even for that defeat at cards, and his mind was racing along a chain of thought that pleased him. Was it possible that Long Ben was counting on letting the Snake Buttes gang square the score for him? Was his luck going to hold out to the very end? He arose, slowly nodding.

"I'll promise you that right now, Ben, no matter what you got to tell me; an' I'm shore honin' to listen to you."

Side by side, they walked toward the rear room, Ben stopping at the door to let his companion enter first. Hiding his exultation, he looked back at the bartender, raised a hand in a well-known signal, and then stepped inside the little room, closing the door behind him. For an hour or more, the indistinct murmur of low voices caused the bartender to glance at that room from time to time, and to take care that no customer loitered near it. His responsibility ceased when the two men stepped into sight again and headed toward his counter.

"What'll you have, Ben?" asked Tex, his face a blank. "Good enough. Give me th' same, bartender. Well, Ben, I'm glad I looked you up. Here's luck!"

"Luck," echoed Long Ben, his expression as blank as his companion's. "You'll mebbly need it." He

cleared his throat, set the empty glass down on the bar, and pushed the bottle toward his companion. "One more, anyhow, to double-rivet that luck. . . . *Ab!* Not so bad for this part of th' country, is it?"

"Right good likker," said Tex. "Have another? No? All right, then. Mebby you can tell me where I can find th' best bed for to-night?"

Long Ben could, and did; and in his room that night Tex continued his intensive practising, and then went over his guns for the last time, carefully, painstakingly; and he found that his wife's contribution of heavy flannels made excellent gun rags. It pleased him to learn that he could make good use of them, and he kept a generous piece for future cleaning. After that, he went to bed and slept the deep and untroubled sleep of the young and righteous.



## CHAPTER VI

### ON THE WAY

GOING back to the Double Y on the morning following the receipt of Johnny's letter, we find a cavalcade winding across the range, stirring up the dust on the narrow trail. Seven men rode at a lope, bound for Wayback and the railroad. Six gunny sacks waved from the pommels of as many saddles, six packs of blankets, slickers, and scanty personal belongings bobbed on the cantles. First came three men riding leg to leg, followed by two pairs of riders. There were periods of silence, and then bursts of excited comment. Farewells had been said to the womenfolk back at the ranch houses, and masculine countenances had tried to keep stern in the face of tears.

Twin River came into sight, and a pause was had for handshakings with Sandy McQueen, Slick Milligan, and other friends, all of whom seemed to be mystified by this exodus; and mystified they remained. The mystery extended beyond the hotel, for low whispers arose in other buildings, whispers tinged with a frightened hope and a trembling avarice. After the last grim lesson taught by the Double Y there naturally followed doubts as to the wisdom of taking chances with the Double Y herds; and who knew how long this boisterous cavalcade would remain away? Who knew how soon

Mesquite Jenkins would return, to prowl hungrily over the Double Y range, seeking whom he might devour?

On again, along the trail winding by the river bank, the dusty miles fell backward, and then Wayback appeared with its humming wires and glistening rails. The train was not due for another hour, according to Billy and his time-table, and, as usual, it was late, having lost so much caste as to yield the right of way to any fast freight concerned.

Saddles were stripped off, wiped, and jammed by main strength and profanity into gaping gunny sacks; scabbarded rifles stood leaning on each other for mutual support. High heels clicked along the narrow platform, grinning faces and ready lips jeered and laughed at the eager inquiries of the curious, already assembling to see the eastbound local come tardily in. Unbottled exuberance found outlet in sundry sudden wrestling matches, and Pete Wilson worked off some of his surplus energy by raising over his head a rusty switch rail lying near the track. Again his shirt sleeves threatened to burst, and his great barrel chest snapped a button from its holding thread.

"Beat you to th' hand-car shed," challenged Lanky, who should have known better. Three men proved him vain, and sprinted back again, awkward in their high-heeled boots, nearly exhausted by the running and the laughter.

Buck and Hopalong were in the little station, talking to the agent and operator, one man playing both parts with time to spare. He divined their circumlocution and smiled easily, having a clear conscience.

"Forgot what them wires said as soon as I had it down on paper," he remarked. "Ain't doin' no guessin', or rememberin', neither." At this he laughed boyishly. "I reckon there's quite some guessin' goin' on, howsom-ever."

"Reckon yo're right," said Buck, toying with another message, which had waited for him to call for it. It announced that Jane would arrive on Number Eighty-One, and Number Eighty-One even now was drawing near to Wayback. Buck was wrestling with an important problem, and he turned to his friend for wise counsel. "Don't know nothin' about Jane," he slowly admitted. "You reckon I better get a buckboard for her?"

"Not if you want to begin right with her at th' very start," answered Hopalong, chuckling. "She could ride, I reckon, before Tex met her; an' I'm right shore can ride plenty good enough by now."

"Schoolmarm, warn't she?"

"Not that I ever heard tell of," answered the limping red-head, grinning widely at the subsidence of Buck's patent alarm. He turned to see Red Connors rolling toward him. "Was Jane ever a schoolmarm, Red?"

"Hope not," said Red. "Got a match?"

"There you go," growled Hopalong, feeling in his pockets. "Ain't hardly got started yet, an' yo're beginnin' to borrow. Why don't you cross th' road an' get some matches?"

"Might miss th' train," replied Red, and wandered back to the platform.

"Why, I gave him a hull box of matches this mornin'," said Buck.

"He's shore thrifty. He'll have that box when he gets back ag'in."

The sounder clicked sharply, and the smiling operator went over to it, grabbing a pencil. In a moment he looked up.

"Eighty-one left Cut Bank twenty minutes ago; oughta be here in another ten," he said.

"Here she comes, away off yonder!" shouted a voice from the platform. "Shore it is! Can't you see th' smoke?"

"Hell, that's dust, blowin' acrost th' ridge."

"Betcha!"

"Yo're on for four bits!"

A concerted yell arose as a black dot crawled into sight.

"Pay him, Skinny! There she is!"

"Pay him nothin'," retorted Skinny. "That makes us even on th' last bet. I *told* him I'd get that money!"

A grinning group was lined up to meet the train, Hopalong, Red, and Buck in the van. As the wheels stopped, a smiling brakeman ushered Jane Ewalt to the platform, where he was pushed aside by two red-heads, and from where he slipped away to see that the little trunk was thrown off. It was, heavily.

"Glad to see you again, ma'am," said the cheerful Hopalong. "Here's Red, too; an' Buck. Meet Tex's wife, Buck: you've got to keep yore eye on her for a few weeks."

"I know you already, Mr. Peters," said Jane, the

phrase "few weeks" ringing in her mind. "And I'm glad to see you again, Mr. Connors; and you, too, Hopalong."

"We was just wonderin' how to get you out to th' ranch, Mrs. Ewalt," said Buck, a little anxiously. "Might take you as far as Twin River on a saddle; an' from there, th' next day, in a buckboard."

"That can wait," said Hopalong, seeing the last sacked saddle tossed aboard. "We only got a minute, an' I want Jane to meet th' rest of th' boys. Come here, fellers! This foolish-lookin' person is Skinny Thompson; here is Lanky Smith, an' both are bachelors, temporary; Pete Wilson, here, an' Billy Williams are bachelors permanent."

"All aboard!" called the conductor, fussily.

"Tie him up, Red," said Buck, his thumb indicating the shiny blue uniform. "He's lost his right-of-way now over everythin' but a hand-car, an' a couple minutes more ain't goin' to kill him."

Pete, the woman-hater, joined Red in a smiling advance on the fussy conductor. Red took one arm in a friendly grasp; and Pete, the other. Despite struggles and language the blue-clad official went into the little station, and stopped in the waiting room in front of a soiled and fly-specked map of the railroad.

"That's th' place we was figgerin' on gettin' off," said Red, pressing a firm forefinger on the intersection of two thin, black lines. "For a man headin' down Texas way, is that right?"

"We're sorta green about trains," explained Pete, gently restraining the angry man. "You ain't lookin'

at it a-tall," he reproved. "Right there —where Red's got his finger. See it?"

"Yes, I see!" shouted the conductor. "Let go of me! Yo're holdin' up th' train!"

"I ain't holdin' up no train, but I might," said Pete, "if I used both hands."

Out on the platform, affairs were going nicely. Buck had read Tex's letter and turned it over to Hopalong for the latter to study at leisure. The grinning punchers had backed off and left Jane, Buck, and Hopalong to make the best of the fleeing seconds. The shrieking whistle of the engine at last was heeded, and Hopalong shook hands with his companions and turned away. His shout brought Red and Pete into sight again, both talking earnestly and at the same time, trying to drown the excited and none too polite remarks of the trainman. They tenderly lifted him to the platform of the train, despite his hectic assurance that he had to be on the ground to give the starting signal. As soon as they let go of him he darted down again, waving his arm with vigour. The train started eastward with a jerk which was nothing if not emphatic, making the heads and arms bob violently in the open windows.

Jane watched the departure of the train through eyes blurred with tears, waving as long as she could see a head or a hat. Then she slowly turned to the grim man at her side, who stood with his feet far apart as though to meet an onslaught.

"If I ever see Johnny Nelson again, I can tell him that he can be proud of his friends," she said with quivering lips.



"Reckon that's somethin' nobody has to tell Johnny," said Buck, a smile breaking through the sternness of his expression.

"They're splendid, and I do so hope they will all come back again."

"Right good crowd of boys," admitted Buck, his eyes shining with pride. "Reckon they'll come back ag'in, afore long." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Makes me feel sorta lost, havin' to stay behind, this way; but I reckon Johnny'll know how it is. That's what a man gets for growin' old, an' bein' hog-tied with a ranch."

"You may be sure he'll understand, Mr. Peters."

"My friends all call me Buck," said the foreman, smiling. "Mostly forget I got another name. Wish I could 'a' seen Tex before he left, but he'll be up here right soon."

"Then you don't think that he, or they, will be gone long; or be in much danger?"

"No tellin' how long they'll be gone; an' as for danger, I wouldn't be in them rustlers' shoes for a hull lot. No, ma'am, I wouldn't."

"They seemed like soldiers going to war," she muttered, turning her face away.

"I figger it's more like a huntin' trip," chuckled Buck glancing at her. "Now, let's see: It's a shore long ride to th' ranch, Jane. Can't hardly get there till after dark. Mebby you'd rather stop overnight in Twin River an' go on to-morrow in a buckboard?"

"Do you think I can make it all the way, to-day?"

"Been doin' much ridin' since winter?"

"Miles of it," answered Jane, her eyes sparkling. "I won't mind if I'm a little crippled to-morrow."

"Sounds like Tex's wife," chuckled Buck. "We'll decide that, final, after we get to Twin. Need yore trunk before to-morrow afternoon?"

"I can get along very nicely without it, Mr.—Buck," answered Jane, indicating her small satchel.

"Fine! Reckon we'll start. Wait till I see Jameson about that trunk; an' I want to get some feller to drive back th' boys' cayuses."

They started toward the halfway point along the muttering Jones's Luck River, talking volubly to turn their thoughts from other things; but the other things were jealous and would not be denied.

Miles east of them, a dusty train clicked off a steadily increasing gap, its smoking car a smoking car in truth. It also was a noisy car, as Hopalong and the conductor discovered as they entered it after a heart-to-heart talk on the swaying lurching platform outside. Somewhat restored to good humour, the trainman punched the tickets and exchanged a little banter with the grinning, good-natured crowd of boys who never would grow up. Passing back to his seat in another car, which also served for his office, the conductor smiled as the train boy passed him for the forward car, and he called the youth back to him.

"Crowd of punchers in there, Jimmy, askin' for pennies. They're a good crowd, an' want a harmless game. Now, far be it from me to cause depreciation of United States currency; but, if I had any pennies I'd sell 'em twenty for two bits as long as th' supply held out."

"Yes, sir; want some?"

"No, no," chuckled the conductor. "I was just wondering if the other passengers on this train might not have more pennies than they want."

"Yes, sir," said the train boy, and went on again, to pause inside the smoking-car door and listen, open mouthed, to the argument going on.

"I don't care nothin' about that, a-tall," Red was saying with plenty of emphasis. He pulled energetically at a bulging gunny sack and stepped aside as the pile of saddles toppled. "This here new saddle of mine ain't goin' to be th' bottom of no heap like that while I got the strength to pull it out!"

"That's th' worst of buyin' a saddle for its looks," said Lanky. "If it was worth anythin', it wouldn't make no difference where it was piled!"

"It's th' best Cheyenne *you* ever saw!"

"Meanin' I've been blind all my life?"

"Not blind, but just dumb!"

"Not dumb, Red," hastily interposed Skinny. "He may be blind an' deaf, an' right stoopid, but he never was dumb, worse luck."

"I wouldn't mind bein' deaf!" retorted Lanky.

"Deaf, dumb, or blind, my saddle ain't goin' to hold up all them others, an' that's flat!" replied Red, glaring.

"Don't reckon that there saddle could hold up nothin'," growled Lanky. "Here, Pieface: put *mine* on th' bottom; *mine*'ll hold up anythin', not bein' th' tender kind." He grunted. "*I* got a saddle!"

"Yeah, you have; an' you'll have saddle *sores* if you get me ridin' you!"

"Any time you want to start ridin'——"

"That so?"

"Yes, that's so!"

A youthful voice broke into the squabble, uncertain because of excitement.

"Here you are, gents: twenty pennies for two bits. Pop corn, chewin' gum, candy, latest magazines, Salt Lake papers!"

The argument died a swift death in the rush toward the half frightened boy. His basket was emptied of everything eatable or chewable, and his pockets emptied of pennies at the new rate of exchange. He wriggled out of the press and hastened back the way he had come, dreaming of riches.

"Who's got th' cards?" demanded Billy, loudly enough to be heard over the chewing.

"Pete," said Lanky, with difficulty. The molasses candy was sharp with butter, and the resulting salivation, coupled to the size of the mouthful, did not help his enunciation.

"Me?" asked Pete, licking off a chocolate-covered finger tip. "Never gave me no cards."

"Shore did; don't you remember?"

"Nobody never gave me nothin'," firmly denied Pete, hunting over the other fingers.

"I heard somebody givin' you hell," said Skinny. "Dig up them cards an' let's get some action."

"Lissen to Skinny!" jeered Billy. "Goin' to get some *action* playin' penny-ante!"

"Huh! All married men figger that way," said Pete.

"Every time a married man gits his hands on to a

two-bit piece, he saves it up in case he might need some ready cash. Get yore hands outa my pockets, Lanky, afore I shove *you* in one of 'em."

"Then dig up them cards, you half-breed!"

"Here you are, gents: twenty pennies for two bits. Pop corn, chewin' gum, candy, latest magazines, Salt Lake papers!"

Dwindling stocks were forthwith renewed, more pennies changed hands, and a bright-eyed youngster went back on another hunt for coppers.

"Come on, Pete," growled Lanky, his mouth full of lemon drops. "Hand over them cards!"

"I tell you I never had th' damn things!" protested Pete, stealing a stick of gum from a handy pocket. Bananas and gum ought to make a remarkable combination, not to mention the second round of chocolates being reduced.

"All painted up like a Piegan goin' to war," jeered Billy, pointing at Pete's smeared face. Pete grinned guiltily and brought out his red bandanna to wipe off the chocolate and the streaks of banana. The cards fell from it and slid under a seat. Lanky disappeared, and then emerged with the deck, and with plenty of dust and cinders. In another moment the game was being started.

"Count me out of it," said Hopalong, seating himself across the aisle. "Got a letter to read an' think over. Join *you* later, when there won't be so many to take it away from."

He became oblivious to the noise almost at his shoulder, being accustomed to it, and soon was deep in Tex's



letter, grinning or nodding as the points made their appeal. It was quite a long letter, although tersely written, with no wasted words; and Hopalong found it full of meat.

"Here you are, gents: twenty pennies for two bits. Pop corn, chewin' gum, candy, latest magazines, Salt Lake papers."

"Who trained that parrot?" asked Skinny.

"Here, Pete!" said Lanky. "You don't have to borrow from nobody; here's th' penny bank back ag'in."

"Got any more of them chocolate things, like you had before?" asked Skinny.

"Got any of them ready-made cigarettes that smell like hell?" asked Hopalong. "I like th' way they strangle me."

"Yes, sir; plenty of 'em!"

"Bring 'em in, all of 'em—might as well buy 'em at once an' save time."

The train boy whisked his empty basket through the door, bound on one more search for copper currency among the more friendly-looking passengers. If pennies, stock, and strength held out, he hoped to lay the foundation of his fortune.

"What's old Tex got to say?" asked Skinny, while Pete shuffled and dealt. There always was time for conversation when Pete handled the cards.

"More than I could explain to you in a couple of hours," replied Hopalong. "When it comes to usin' his head, he makes more hits with less bullets than anybody you ever saw. Don't reckon I'll play much poker. Not to-day, anyhow; I got plenty to figger out."



"Which way is he goin' in?" asked Red.

"West side. I'm figgerin' on th' south, but want to talk to Waffles before I'm shore."

"Any wonder our cards get all fuzzy on th' edges?" asked Lanky, sarcastically, eyeing the hard-working Pete. "You don't have to bulldog a deck, Pete. Handle it gentle—it's plumb tame."

"We'll show you how tame it is," said Skinny, reassuringly.

"Here you are, gents: twenty pennies for two bits. Pop corn, chewin' gum, candy, latest magazines, Salt Lake papers."

"We shore started somethin' with you, sonny," said Skinny, sighing. He dug down in his pocket and produced a silver dollar. "Here: take this cartwheel out on th' back platform an' practise balancin' it on yore nose. When you can do it without missin', come back here an' we'll give you a dollar each."

"Yes, sir," said the boy, dubiously, and departed with another empty basket and no pennies.

"If we could get that kid to believe that Nevady would pay two bits for twenty pennies, all we'd have to do would be to foller him an' his basket," chuckled Red. "All ready, Pete?"

Weary hours, despite the best their wits could suggest, despite the scramble from the train at every stop, and the more energetic scramble to get on board again; weary hours of daylight, and wearier hours of night; hours whose weariness was cumulative, marked the journey eastward, and then southward. And then, when patience nearly had reached its end, they stepped

on sunny Texas soil, to stretch their legs and rest up for a new but shorter journey. They had reached Sandy Bend, and it looked good to them, despite the fact that they could duplicate it in memory by a dozen frontier towns. It was summer in Sandy Bend, and the leaves on the trees were full-blown; where they had come from, the leaves were just beginning to unfold.

## CHAPTER VII

### SANDY BEND

IT WAS the same old Waffles who met them at the office of Twitchell and Carpenter, the old-time foreman of the O Bar O. The passing years had treated him gently, seeming to make richer his understanding; kinder the critical faculties; slower the speech of this good, old-time friend. He could not entirely conceal his delight at meeting his old Bar 20 friends, although he tried to, hard enough; but his eyes and his voice betrayed him. It was just a careless gathering of old friends during the sunny hours of the morning, and laughter pointed many of the reminiscences. After the noonday meal, however, business intruded. The happy group, with Red in the lead, strolled around the town and did what fancy dictated. Hopalong and Waffles were not with them, but went to the offices of the cattle company.

Mr. Twitchell, representing the firm, gave his Montana visitor a warm welcome. He felt somewhat under obligations to this smiling red-head who had been so instrumental, with his two companions, in solving vexatious problems for the firm up in a little town called Mesquite, where their Question Mark ranch was lo-

cated. Thanks to them, one main-line trail was again safe for the T. & C. herds, and the herds of any other brand. Around Mesquite, Hopalong, Red, and Johnny were still referred to as the Bar 20 Three.

He mentioned this former activity and asked about the health and fortune of the other two Bar 20 men.

"Red's in town, with th' other boys," said Hopalong. "Johnny is in trouble, Mr. Twitchell; an' that's why we are down here in yore country. If you'd like to hear what little I know about it, I'll be glad to tell you. I've got a favour to ask you, based on it; an' after you've listened you might be very willin' to lend me Waffles, here, for a few weeks. Of course, what we're goin' to talk about must be kept secret. As a cattleman, I reckon you'll understand that."

"Seein' how it concerns cow-thieves," explained Waffles.

"Of course, Mr. Cassidy. You can't stop now. I want to hear all about it," said the senior member of the firm. He laughed, opened the drawer of the desk, and placed a box of cigars on a corner. "Light up, boys, an' let's have it all."

At the end of the recital, Twitchell leaned forward in his chair, his eyes glinting. His trail herd, under MacCullough, had gone up that way to pick up its needed cattle and had not obtained them. The trail herd had not been molested, somehow; but there had been quite a little trouble in rounding out the full number of drive cattle to make good on his contract. He found that he was very much interested in the troubles around Gunsight.

"Now, sir," he said, crisply. "Just what are you goin' to do?"

"Goin' into th' Snake Buttes like a reg'lar Kansas twister an' clean 'em right down to th' soil," answered Hopalong grimly.

"Right!" exclaimed Twitchell. "Does this Nevady know yo're comin'?"

"Not unless he's read my mind."

"Th' Snake Buttes, themselves, are quite a little off our reg'lar drive trail, ain't they, Waffles?" asked the senior member.

"Yes, quite considerable; but if them fellers get into th' habit of raidin' east, they'll mebbey pay a little attention to our drives," answered Waffles, trail boss. "If they watch for us, they can make us a lot of trouble; an' don't forget that we've been roundin' out our herds up in th' Gunsight country, an' that MacCullough had to go on with half a herd."

"I ain't forgettin' that," said Twitchell, with a growl. He turned to his visitor. "You spoke of askin' me for a favour, an' th' lend of Waffles. What's th' favour?"

"Th' lend of Waffles," said Hopalong, grinning.

"That all?"

"It's aplenty, Mr. Twitchell," answered Hopalong. "With Waffles in charge of a few picked men, guardin' th' SV, I reckon Johnny will be able to breathe easier. He can't afford to go on losin' cattle like he has, an' it's goin' to take a little time before we can get into th' Snake Buttes an' give them thieves somethin' hot to think about. After we get started, I reckon Johnny won't have much trouble on his range."

"An' you boys come 'all th' way down here from Montany to chip in on a game like this, to help Nelson out?"

Hopalong nodded, and looked a little surprised.

"Yes, we did. You see, th' Kid's one of us."

"H'm!" grunted Twitchell. "I've heard a lot of tales about that old Bar 20 outfit. H'm!" After a moment he spoke again.

"What's th' name of that storekeeper, up there in Gunsight, Waffles?"

"Ben Dailey."

"Yeah—remember it now. Mr. Cassidy, how many men are you figgerin' on takin' up to help Nelson? I mean them with Waffles."

"With what Johnny has, an' with Lin Sherwood's outfit an' th' Triangle crowd, I reckon between six and ten will be enough. I was goin' to go over that with Waffles."

"Depends a hull lot on th' men, I reckon," muttered Twitchell, reflectively. "Got any of 'em in mind, Waffles?"

"Well, not all of 'em," answered the trail boss. "I can name some."

"All right; you pick yore crew. Take what hosses you need, an' things like that. After you get up there, give that man Dailey a letter I'll have ready for you, an' draw on him for supplies. I owe Nelson an' his friends a good turn, an' aim to pay it; also, I'm rememberin' MacCullough and his half a herd. Between us all, we ought to be able to rig up a purty fair buzz-saw for them ——— thieves to play with." He looked



quickly from Hopalong to Waffles. "Either one of you boys ever been in th' Snake Buttes?"

Both men shook their heads, but each replied that he knew where the buttes were.

"So does 'most everybody," retorted Twitchell; "but that don't do us no good." He arose and walked over to a set of drawers, pawed noisily around among the contents of one of them, and produced a map. "Here's somethin' that'll help us a little. Of course, th' buttes themselves ain't never been explored; but one of my old-time trail bosses has been through some parts of 'em several times. After you get through lookin' at this map, go around an' see old John Winchester. He'll mebby tell you some right interestin' things. An' whatever he does tell you, you can swear by."

"We'll shore do that," said Waffles, as Hopalong nodded.

The map of the country surrounding the buttes was studied and a few rough sketches made from it, and then old John Winchester was visited. The conference with him lasted two hours, but seemed like one. Old John had hunted and prospected all along the Snake Buttes, penetrated varying distances into them, and had spent several seasons on their edges. He never had gone into them very far, because of the lack of water, and that part of them which he knew best was the northwest section, where a few *tinajas* held surface water until about midsummer. A saddle horse and pack animal demanded more water daily than the buttes afforded over any one course into them. He drew rough

maps of the few rock wells and was otherwise vague and unsatisfactory; but he was almost photographic when it came to describing the best route to approach the Snake Butte country from the south and southwest. The trail he laid down unhesitatingly was crowded with notes about small but necessary details, and no experienced plainsman could go wrong as long as he had this chart. Without this map and information a stranger might wander perilously and be lost because of lack of water and grass; with the map and notes he could strike unerringly for the outer edge of the buttes along a trail with convenient camping places. When they had learned all they could, the visitors arose and prepared to leave. The old man went with them to the door.

"If I warn't so old an' no-account, damned if I wouldn't go with you boys," he said, ruefully. "I shore would like ter prospect a little, once more, before they plant me; but I'm seventy years old, an' I reckon my prospectin' days are over."

"Come along," invited Hopalong, smiling. "We'll grub-stake you, pay you wages while yo're with us, an' turn you loose when we reach th' buttes. We'll make better time with you guidin' us." In his heart he felt that old John was right, that his prospecting days were over. His offer was an attempt at subtle flattery, to make the old man feel better.

"Shore would like ter, shorely would, mister," sighed the old man, glancing down at his old, worn body, a traitor to his hope and to his will. He lowered his voice and glanced behind him at a closed door leading to

the kitchen. "Old woman's gettin' sorta crotchety. Don't reckon I better go. Better stay right here an' die of dry rot, like a useless old fool. When a man gets as old as me, he ain't worth nothin', an' he might jest as well die an' get it over with."

"Well, you know best, Mr. Winchester," said Hopalong, shaking hands with the old man. "We're right obliged to you for th' maps an' all th' information. You've made things right plain, an' mebbly saved us a lot of trouble. Wonder if we could make you a little present?"

"No, no," hastily said the old man. "Allus like to do what I can for th' boys; allus like to do what I can. No, no!" His eyes turned to an old muzzle-loading rifle resting on pegs against the wall, an old frontier thoroughbred that had done its share in moulding the history of Texas. He pointed to it with a trembling hand, and shook his head sorrowfully. "Thar she rests, useless as her owner; an' both of us are purty nigh wore out an' out of step, nowadays."

"If that gun is as good as you are, right now, it's in right good shape," said Waffles.

The old man shook his head.

"Reckon mebbly she's worsen," he admitted. "Her riflin' is all wore out at th' muzzle, an' that's where riflin' counts. I've wore out a lot of wipin' sticks on that old gun, an' now they've wore her out. Couldn't hit a dollar with her at fifty paces no more, not even from the rest. She's done, an' I'm nigh to it."

"Ever feel like you'd care to use a ca'tridge gun?" asked Hopalong.

"Allus had a hankerin' for one," said the old man. "Allus wanted one of them big Sharps, one of them buffaler guns; but long's I had th' old girl, up thar, thar warn't no sense of buyin' another." He chuckled to hide the hurt of present poverty. "'Sides, them big ca'tridges cost a heap of money; an' I'm gettin' older all th' time, an' didn't have no call for to git me one."

Hopalong laughed with his face, but in his heart he was not laughing. Poverty is a bitter and terrible thing when coupled to seventy years of age. He opened the door, letting Waffles through first, and rested a hand lightly on the old man's shoulder.

"I know they cost money," he said, ruefully. "I'm aimin' to buy more boxes of ca'tridges than I like to think about. When you take th' boys on a war trail, you shore have got to furnish th' ammunition, grub an' about everythin' else. Well, good luck, Mr. Winchester; an' thank you a heap for what you've told me." The old body aroused pity, and he yielded to a harmless white lie, to leave a pleasant taste in the old man's mouth.

"You may be seventy, but you shore don't look it by fifteen years," he said. "If you'd like to try yore hand prospectin' ag'in, you know where to find us. We could use a good guide till we strike th' Snake Buttes. We're payin' reg'lar trail wages, with good chuck, an' all th' ca'tridges a man wants to use. Thank you, sir, an' good-bye."

Passing out of the little yard, Hopalong and his friend turned their steps toward the small hotel where they expected to find the rest of their friends.

"I'd like to make th' old man a present," said Hop-along, thoughtfully. "He's saved us days of heart-breakin' travellin' an' scoutin'—yes, mebbby weeks. Saved us a lot of time ridin' an' worryin', an' mebbby a deal of real trouble. Wonder how I could hand him fifty dollars, neat like, an' not hurt his feelin's?"

"You can't do it," said Waffles emphatically. "He's pore as sin an' proud as Lucifer. Twitchell an' Carpenter are goin' to give him an easy job an' overpay him for it. They dassn't offer him a pension. It'd be like a slap in his face. You don't know old John like we do."

"Well, you know best; but I reckon a brand-new Sharps an' some ca'tridges wouldn't raise his hackles none." He scratched his head, and grinned. "How'd you reckon it'd hit him?"

"Like an ax," answered Waffles without hesitation. "It'd knock him into a heap an' tickle him nigh to death."

They went on in silence for a few moments, and then Waffles glanced sideways as he heard his companion chuckle.

"Old John's goin' to have th' best Sharps in this town. Only hope it won't tempt him to slip away from his wife an' go off on one last prospectin' trip. He's old, an' he might never come back ag'in; but he's one of th' old breed, an' he won't actually believe that he's old until it's too late. I wouldn't want to be responsible for him dyin' out in th' hills."

"He won't die out in no hills while his wife is alive. She's got him plumb gentled an' afraid of th' rope. John is goin' to die in his bed in spite of himself. Give



him th' gun: you ain't got no idear what it'll mean to him."

"Reckon I will; an' only a couple boxes of ca'tridges," replied Hopalong. "They come ten in a box, an' twenty won't be enough to tempt him to take no trips. Now, then: who are you figgerin' on takin' up to th' SV with you? Buck's payin' all th' bills, an' you can offer better pay than they'll get around here. They've got to be tough, through an' through; an' boys that you know an' can trust."

"Yeah; an' boys that know me an' will do what I say," replied Waffles. "I want a crew that's got itchin' trigger fingers. I can get it, too. Twitchell an' Carpenter ain't drivin' heavy this year, an' there's th' makin' of two trail gangs waitin' for somethin' to do. Most of them are men that have been up th' trail with me. They'll take trail wages an' be glad to get it. Turn to th' left, if you want th' hotel. Keno. There they are, hangin' on to th' veranda railin'. You don't know how glad I am to see them boys ag'in—every last one of 'em. Too bad Buck couldn't come along."

"It shore is," said Hopalong. He chuckled. "There ain't no better crowd nowhere than them boys. I'd know that was an eatin' house without bein' told. Here they come!"

They did. They formed a noisy escort, stirring up large amounts of dust. They tramped into the wash-room and out again. They rushed the dining room at the first tinkle of the bell; and after verbally silent but energetic gastronomic endeavours they tramped out again, eager for an evening in surroundings where



less decorum was the rule. Hopalong and Waffles went out to buy a rifle and many boxes of different kinds of cartridges. It was wiser to buy the latter now than to take a chance on a scanty stock in an even smaller town.

Together, they carried the heavy packages back to the hotel, and then visited old John Winchester.

Mrs. Winchester admitted them, frankly suspicious of their errand.

"Yes, he's home—where he's goin' to stay," she said. "Come in."

The old man arose and advanced to meet them, eying the long and bulky bundle under Hopalong's arm.

"Fergit what I told ye?" he asked, chuckling.

"Not more'n a word or two," said Hopalong, smiling. "Just to let you know what I think about what you told me, an' how likely I am to remember it all, here's a little present that ain't all wore out smooth near th' muzzle."

The old man's hands trembled with eagerness as he untied the cord and tore off the paper. A .45-120 Sharps sporting rifle rewarded him, and he stroked it, careless of grease and oil.

"You shouldn't 'a' done it, you shouldn't 'a' done it," he muttered. "Purty as a picture, she is! Purty as a picture, mister. Look at it, Ma! Jest you look at it!"

"I'm a-lookin'!" snapped his wife. "Reckon you won't rest till ye've gallivanted off some'r's with it. Well, ye ain't goin' to! Hang it right up thar an' then wash off yore hands!"

The old man followed the pointing finger and the

rigid arm, looked at the old muzzle-loader, and then at his visitors. He winked at the latter, and hung the new rifle on the second set of pegs.

After a few more words, the visitors departed, restraining their chuckles until safely away from the house. They returned to the hotel, there to close themselves in Hopalong's room and to talk over their plans until the hour grew late. Laughter and loud voices rang out in the street below, and careless steps thumped and echoed in the big frame building, telling them that their friends at last were turning in for the night. The calls and quips between the rooms grew less, and finally ceased as a snore or two sounded through the hall. At last Waffles arose to leave, the conference ended. Every eventuality that could be thought of had been allowed for.

"You can get good cayuses at Independence," said Waffles. "Be shore to mention my name, like I told you; an' let 'em reckon yo're workin' for Twitchell an' Carpenter. I've got a good holt on everythin' we've decided on, an' me an' my boys will do our best to hold things down purty tight on th' SV. I won't see you when you leave in th' mornin', because I'll be roundin' up a couple of th' boys. Good luck, Hoppy; an' give 'em hell!"

"Same to you, Waffles. It's been right nice to see you ag'in. We'll shore see you up at Gunsight, one of these days, when things have got a lot sweeter."

"I wonder where Tex is about now?" queried Waffles, pausing in the doorway.

"Wish I knew. He's mebbly in th' buttes by this

time. Wish I was with him: there ain't no tellin' what he'll run into if he finds that gang."

"No, there ain't no tellin'. Well, good luck, Hoppy. Say good-bye for me to th' boys," and the door gently closed between two good and loyal friends. They had reason to worry about Tex, and they might have been surprised had they known just where he was at that moment. Tex Ewalt not only was in the buttes, but he was facing a hard and suspicious crowd of cattle thieves, and talking to save his life.

## CHAPTER VIII

### ATTAINMENTS

**S**NAKE BUTTES. They very likely had been named because of the windings and twistings of the valleys, cañons, chasms, and arroyos, since there were no more snakes to be found in the butte country than in many places outside of it; less, really, for the land was arid and forbidding.

The individual buttes, themselves, were not especially large, and most of them were well eroded; and, as might be expected, many of them presented grotesque mimicry of well-known objects. Strictly speaking, they were not buttes, since instead of being isolated they were crowded together and provided no contrast of flat plain and striking natural monument; rather, it was a cañon country, a plateau deeply scored with cañons, whose dividing heights, presenting the characteristics of buttes without the isolation, were remarkably eroded. Even a sluggish imagination could hardly fail to be impressed by the forms presented, and a lively imagination would find names for scores of them.

In the northwest section of the country, the buttes were higher, vaster, had steeper sides and less detritus, and came more nearly to approach the massive grandeur of their namesakes of the Green and Colorado rivers;

in the southwestern part, many of them were hardly more than shapeless masses of crumbling rock and clay, the talus often reaching to and sometimes nearly hiding the original core. These southern buttes, of course, were not so high; and beyond them, out on the more level stretches which become a more or less level plain, the gradation of heights passed through the loma stage, where the winds had better and more constant access to the broken talus and crumbling detritus and removed the dust as rapidly as it was made, leaving the rock cores swept quite clean. These winds also sand-blasted the humped-up hills, wearing away such things as sharp edges and corners, and in time ground the lomas into rounded hills.

An observant man might have explained the gradation of the high buttes of the north to the gentle lomas and rolling plain of the south by saying that in the ages past the vast cap of stone which formed the surface of a great and sloping plain had been of varying thickness and hardness, being harder and thicker in the north, and thinning and softening in the south. Perhaps an earthquake or two had started the disintegration of this cap layer by cracking it here and there; or perhaps frost, the cutting of heavy rainfall flowing down the slopes, or the keen and rapid cutting of sand-laden winds had slowly pierced it in the softer places; but whatever the first attack might have been, it left the protecting cap layer at the mercy of erosion. Faults, once bared, were constantly under the cutting of flowing surface water and the blasting of the winds, and grew steadily wider and deeper. That part of the plain which was

better protected by the hardness or thickness of the cap layer had suffered less; while those portions less strongly protected had more easily yielded to the scouring. The result of the struggle between the opposing forces had turned this whole section into a land of bulky heights and deep bottoms, the latter a perfect network of chasms, cañons, valleys, and arroyos; an immense natural maze, where the traveller became confused and lost almost before he realized that he was in it.

About the central part of this great section, many of the valleys were rich in water and grass, a grass of surprising quality, and a grass which appeared early, matured early, and cured early, holding its nutriment throughout the seasons. The numerous springs which bust forth here from the lower strata, finding their way upward through faults in the floors of the valleys, flowed hopefully down the general slope of the watershed, blindly following their destiny; but not one of them reached sea water via the surface of the ground. The faulted subterranean strata of rock, perhaps not reinforced by layers of clays, provided sinks in which these small streams were lost. This, perhaps, accounts for the stern aridity surrounding the favoured central section, and the wide and forbidding belts of desert sand, pebbled floors, and rocky stretches which extended on all sides of the Snake Buttes. Springs and water pockets were many miles apart, and unreliable, outside the fertile inner portion.

Out on this outer belt there was no grazing. Soft sand, its grains appearing rounded under a microscope, and therefore connected in thought with the bed of a



one-time sea, but more likely rounded because of ceaseless attrition, lay deep and unstable here and there over the outer belt. It moved in the wind with a too facile readiness, twisting in towering spirals to dance erratically hither and yon; it swept in great curtains of dusty fog over miles of country, stinging, torturing, and half suffocating any unfortunate living thing exposed to its relentless fury; it piled up in shining ridges in wave after wave, submerging and killing all vegetation; it formed gentle and vast slopes of beautifully rippled sand, or it lay in broken waves sharply cut on each leeward face, reflecting the deep blue sky of early morning and the warmer sky tints of evening. The sands of the dunes and the gentler slopes changed, chameleon-like, at the caprice of the sky overhead, and took unto themselves colours and tints of rarest beauty. Yet the inherent colour was that of sand, varying shades of yellow according to the amount and colour of the dust mixed with it. Under this moving threat, surface water holes were lost, living springs were covered up, to creep blindly beneath the treacherous blanket. The whole aspect of miles of country was changed by a stirring of the wind as old contours died and new ones appeared; and the courage of living trespassers also changed. Why is it that the instruments of death so often are beautiful? Why does Nature try to hide her infamy on the desert by veilings of indescribable beauties of colour?

The Snake Buttes were unknown, unexplored, and left alone. There was so much vastly better land lying around for any one who wanted it that there had been

no reason to attempt the taming of the buttes. Earlier activities, largely concerned with moving from one part of the country to another, chose easier routes, where water and grass could be found in reasonable quantities, at reasonable distances, and with reasonable certainty. These earlier routes became established and accepted. They were known, they lacked that dangerous element of risk, they were short enough and direct enough, and both cattle and wagons could follow the well-beaten paths with comparative ease and safety. The roads either grew from or became cattle trails, or the cattle trails roughly paralleled them. Settlers located along the former and gave to the timid or cautious an added assurance. There never had been any need to attempt the mastery of the butte country, for it lay out of the direct line of travel; and no one but a madman would think of attempting to take wagons through it, because of the sheer physical impossibility of overcoming or restraining gravity. Coupled to this was the deadly and treacherous sand, the lack of water and grass, and the maddening confusion of the miles of maze. Snake Buttes were left very much alone and were considered worthless.

Human knowledge, energy, and ingenuity yearly cut down the numbers of the worthless things. One hesitates to state flatly that this thing or that thing is truly and utterly worthless. So one might have hesitated to accept the dictum that the Snake Buttes were worthless. In the early days, four men hesitated to accept it. Being urged against their wishes and inclinations, they made for Snake Buttes; yet even as

they set the pace for the hot pursuit, they knew that the Snake Buttes were not worthless. They granted that, admitted it tacitly; and they were right. Two hours after they entered the confusing network of the maze they were free men; if men could be free who dared not leave the buttes.

By sheer luck, they stumbled upon one of the inner grassed and watered valleys. This was on the second day, when their tongues were beginning to click against their teeth, and their lips to swell from thirst. One among them, unadorned by nature with those things which impress the uncritical, managed to stagger between his frantic companions and the water. His will and courage and personality, now stripped to the bare for men to see and believe, controlled the drinking. Minutes later, although they swore it was hours, he let them drink again.

A fire of sagebrush, a hot pan of bacon and beans, and a niggardly ration of coffee changed the point of view of the harried four. The horses were knee deep in lush grass, cropping contentedly. The setting sun shone on pinks and yellows, turning them to red and gold. Before the bacon and beans, the colours had been dirty and depressing. A game trail led to a limpid pool and told them that they might not starve. Tobacco further improved the colours and invested the valley with certain beauties heretofore unguessed. The largest of the four leaned back against his saddle and sighed.

"Well, Nevady—here we are."

"Much better than kickin' at th' end of a rope," said

Nevada, who seemed to dominate. "We'll rest a day or two an' then look around."

Silence ensued, each busy with his own thoughts. The thoughts of three were futile, commonplace, concerned with the feel of food, the taste of tobacco: a full stomach adds nothing to an empty head. Too many men are vegetals, content with the orderly processes of metabolism; and such men attain their mental stature early, and are not dismayed when they find it to be dwarfed. So it was with three of these, but it was not so with the fourth.

Nevada was dreaming daydreams, as many men before him had dreamed through the long history of the species. Among them were Alexander, Cæsar, Napoleon, if we skim the cream of ambition: distorted though this comparison is, it serves as an indicator to the thoughts of a lesser light and the method of accomplishment. With sword and banner and a marching host, history and mankind deal gently, bestowing honours; that is war; to classify four outcasts, lacking swords and banners, although they may be a host in themselves, there are other terms. And, in both cases, the other terms are the true ones, if intentions and results form our criterion of truth. They are all plunderers, differing only in degree.

The fire died down quickly, being of sage and not constantly fed. The long shadows, stealing swiftly across the valley's floor, now climbed the eastern heights, reached their tops, and changed the molten iron into graying stone. The streamers of flame died

out as the sun sank lower, although a crimson western sky tinted everything, making individual discords to blend into one enfolding dissonance, if we may be allowed to substitute terms of sound for those of sight.

The fourth man still leaned back against his saddle, his legs spread defiantly. His huge sombrero was drawn down in front, although there was no light save that of myriads of blazing stars. He did not move, except for the gentle rise and fall of his small chest; but inside of him, under that huge hat, there was the swiftly flowing procession of thought, building a little empire. There came the startling splash of water, of squishing hoofs, and a soft whickering; the horses crossed the stream and kept on feeding. Time passed, and then the little man took off his hat and peered at the three dark figures on the lighter ground. He considered them for perhaps half a minute, and shook his head; three were not enough to erect the edifice he was planning; but he knew where he could get all the men he needed. The main thing would be to get the right kind, and never for one moment to let one of them believe that he, Nevada, was not the master.

He unrolled his blanket expertly in the gloom, pulled off his boots, rolled swiftly one way and then the other, lifted his feet with a deft flirt that whipped the blanket back under them, sighed gratefully, and went to sleep. And so began the history of Snake Buttes: not the slow history of geology, blindly and ponderously moving without conception; but the active, dynamic history of man's use of them. And so their name was to rise slowly from the list of negative and useless things,



carelessly spoken and soon dismissed, to attain an importance all of its own in the thoughts of men.

The passing of time had found Nevada's dreams come true, and almost five years from the finding of the fertile inner valleys of the buttes he sat on a bench outside the door of the low, cedar cabin, and watched the evening shadows steal across the valley.

Changes had taken place since he first had looked upon this stretch of greenery and the stealing shadows. The three cabins standing end to end under the jutting side of the mesa matched it so closely in colour as to be practically invisible from a distance. If it were not for the rectangles made by doors and windows, it would take keen eyes, indeed, to pick them out. A branding corral stood not far away, with snubbing posts and the ashy beds of many fires. The best spring was fenced in against the trespass of cattle, numbers of which were grazing throughout the valley. A broad, dusty trail, a gathering of many smaller paths, led from the branding corral past the horse pasture, crossed the valley diagonally, shrunk into a narrow path, and disappeared in a chasm leading westward. No wheel marks marred this trail, for it led where wheels could not follow. Several riders moved about over the valley, lazily cutting out certain cattle; small rivulets crossed the enclosed plain, lost to sight in the deep grass, here and there widening into shallow ponds which caught the light of the dying day and reflected it, gleaming pools of copper in the rich, dark green of the bottom.

Nevada crossed his legs and let himself drift into a pleasant chain of thought. Here was a little settlement



grown prosperous on the property of others, far from the beaten track, splendidly isolated, unknown to any but its own inhabitants, and defended for them by Nature's best efforts. It was girded by a triple belt of natural defenses, each strong in its own peculiar way, and each presenting a difficult barrier against hostile encroachment. Desert, sand hills, and the amazing buttes; lack of grass and water, stretches of hard desert soils to reveal no sign of unshod hoofs, and a shifting sea of sand to obliterate all signs; the steadily growing pressure of famished animals, weakened further by a mounting thirst; and the final blow to fainting courage and strength given by the intricate and baffling maze of the cañons and buttes. These made the total of inert defenses safeguarding this hidden oasis of thievery. Added to these were the splendid defensive positions for active warfare, for sniping from ledges and the tops of the buttes.

Nevada closed his eyes and pictured this little feudal stronghold. In the beginning, he had thought along the lines of the ordinary cattle thief: to raid, rebrand, and to hurry the stolen cattle on to a market, taking the best prices he could obtain from buyers who suspected their changed ownership; always one jump ahead of possible pursuit, always in potential danger, and scurrying back to cover to let the storm die out before attempting another raid. This was the general and accepted operation; but he soon learned that there was no need for speed, once this collection of valleys was reached; no need for hasty brand-blotting, no pressing quick sales. Gradually, he had realized and taken advantage of

the peculiarities of the situation, and, once realized, they were not forsaken.

Here was no temporary haven, but a permanent one; a ranch stocked with stolen cattle, to grow as their natural increase grew. His drive herds were selected as were those of the legitimate ranches. Grown steers were cut out, their marks changed, and driven to market when it suited him; graded bulls and range cows were turned loose on the bottom ranges to grow and to multiply, their succeeding issue to show unchanged brands. The selling end had been worked out well, and the whole machinery of his business ran smoothly and without a hitch.

He was getting rich, and so were his men, as their hoarded savings in currency could well testify. Some of these men, restless spirits who were not content to spend too many years of their lives in the buttes, demanded quicker returns, that they might take their gains and go out into the exciting world, to cut their brief swaths in the gambling halls and frontier saloons. Some of these maintained that the immunity so long enjoyed could not continue indefinitely, that the time would come when the ranchmen would combine in force and spirit sufficient to wipe out the gang; or treachery sink its venomous fangs into their flesh. Steadily the pressure of these impatient men had increased, and at last, Nevada, hoping to get rid of them, had consented to push operations at high speed, buy out their interests, and let them seek that freedom of the outside world.

The circumstances fitted into this change of policy. Long left alone, the ranches to the east slept in a false

sense of security; the gently harried north had been the field for cattle stealing during the last two years. One or two well-planned raids, struck at the proper moment, would yield surprising returns. The field had been visited in person and in force, and the psychological moment had been provided by the end of the round-ups on the eastern ranges; trail herds, held to await the arrival of the travelling herd of Twitchell and Carpenter, offered tempting masses of carefully selected cattle; masses that already were herded and could be run off in their bulk.

Once winter-bound near a government post, Nevada had devoured its small stock of books. Among the volumes there had been one on the proper use of cavalry. This had made dry reading, but it had been better than none at all; and from it Nevada had absorbed certain maxims, a smattering of the theory of cavalry tactics. Some of his reading had lingered in his memory; to strike hard, swiftly, unexpectedly, and to press the attack while confusion reigned. The last impressed him very much, and he believed that it was the master key.

Nevada had struck the eastern ranges again and again, one raid swiftly following on the heels of another, until the ranches around Gunsight had been stripped as though by a plague. His fighting force struck like a thunderbolt under cover of darkness, holding the attention of the desperate ranchers while the other squad ran off the cattle. Death rode abroad with the coming of darkness; ambushes had put out of the fight the more valiant and capable of the defenders. The foreman of the Double X lay next door to death, sur-

rounded by half his outfit, wounded variously and unfit to sit a saddle. Over on the SV, Johnny Nelson, caught in a trap made by a threat against his wife and family, had been stricken down by unseen enemies. Found on the plain on the following day, he had been carried home to spend weary days in bed. Cimarron Quantrell, his *segundo*, nursed a broken leg; Arch Wiggins, vengeful and careless in his courage as youth was likely to be, had let his courage take him a little too far. He lay next to Cimarron, a smashed shoulder and two bullet holes in his arms rendering him helpless. The reign of terror gripped the land, keeping it accursed: men were careful not to enter it to help the outfits. Five hundred selected SV steers were now in a Snake Buttes cañon; four hundred Double X animals, also selected, were in another valley. A miscellaneous herd of SV, Double X, and Triangle stock grazed in another valley, gleaned of steers, to have their brands altered more leisurely and then be turned loose on the range further to stock it.

Nevada now turned these things over in his mind, and as in a vision saw the day when all raiding would be done with; when these valley ranges, stocked almost to capacity with the increase of the present herds, wearing a brand of their own, and one which could not be connected with any of those outside the buttes, would remove him from the rustler class and make him an honest ranchman with honest herds. It was well that the men were growing impatient of the restrictions imposed by the buttes. They would drift away and their places be taken by strangers, who would find no traces of thievery.

This was still a matter for the future, but it was not many years away. When the last rebranded animal had left the buttes, it would mark an epoch in the life of this thinking man; Nevada, the outlaw, would disappear; and George Thomas Teale would be reborn, a solid rancher and a good citizen.

A movement disturbed the daydream, and Nevada looked up to see a man emerge from the last cabin, three long irons in his arms. At their ends, they curved slightly, like the point of a much-used brush; but these were curved not by use, but for it. A Chinese cook stepped from the kitchen of the second house, pail in hand, and moved toward the spring.

"No come back yet, boss?" he asked.

Nevada recrossed his legs and shook his head.

"Not yet, Charley; there's time enough," he said. Raising his voice, he checked the iron bearer. "Don't burn so deep this time, Carp; an' don't let th' irons get so damn hot. That last bunch are so bad with sores that we won't be able to drive 'em out for a couple of weeks. An' take more time joinin' th' marks; some of that blottin' looks like a ten-year-old kid done it." Suddenly remembering the lateness of the hour, he asked a question. "Not startin' to-day, are you?"

"Why, I was goin' down to do them few Double X Durhams, an' get 'em out of th' way for to-morrow's work."

Nevada swore in disgust.

"You got a head like a mule! Goin' to build a fire, heat them irons, *three* of 'em, make a couple of th' boys rope an' snub, just to rebrand a few bulls? Put them



irons back in th' house. If you want to do somethin', shoe that bay hoss." Carp stood in reflective indecision, and was galvanised into action by his chief's next words. "We'll run them Double X brands to-morrow, while we're changin' that little bunch of SV's. What th' hell you standin' there like a fool for?"

Carp muttered something too low for his companion to hear, which was well for Carp, and went back into the house. The frown on Nevada's face died out, and he carelessly rolled a cigarette, idly watching the shadows submerge the cliffs. The distant riders were now coming toward the houses, a small herd of cattle moving before them. They crossed the creek and moved on toward the larger of two corrals, herding their charges inside it, and putting up the bars. Swinging abruptly, they loped up to the houses to see if anything was to be done before they unsaddled.

"That scatterin' bunch is corralled," said the foremost. "We got a couple Durhams in th' little corral, ready for blottin' to-morrow."

Nevada nodded.

"Has Curley an' Ben come back yet?" asked a rider whose interest in the return of the two men was based on an entire lack of smoking tobacco.

"No—ought to show up any minute, now," answered Nevada. He looked at the other two riders, whose bandages were as dirty as their shirts. "Healin' up all right?"

They grunted profane assurance, and said something about lucky shots in the dark, and said something about being luckier than some man by the name of Towson.



One gathered, by inference, that Towson had been killed; and the inference was correct.

"Yo're beginning' to believe what you've been told about that there Nelson feller, ain't you?" chuckled Nevada. "Everythin' was goin' as smooth as grease till them shots busted loose, plumb out of th' dark. You fools *would* smoke cigarettes. Then Towson was dead, an' both of you fellers wounded. You'll let th' house alone hereafter, an' keep yore mind on what yo're told, *by me*, to do. We don't want no woman out here to start a fight among ourselves."

"Aw, that wasn't th' hull of it," spoke up one of the wounded. "They're beginnin' to tighten up, over east. We oughta let things rest for awhile, over there, an' start somethin' up in th' north ag'in."

"When I was a boy there was a sayin' about speakin' when yo're spoke to," replied Nevada, ominously. "We're goin' to let th' east alone when I say th' word. Just now I ain't sayin' it. *There's* yore smokin' tobacco, Gila."

Gila and his companions turned in their saddles and saw a line of pack animals moving in single file across the valley. Behind them were two mounted men, jogging lazily along. A light sprang up in the second house, which was connected by a passage with the first building. Here the Chinese cook was placing food on the long table.

The three mounted men with Nevada rode away toward the horse corral and soon returned on foot, ready to give a hand in unpacking the nearing loads. The snake-like procession wound between the two corrals,

passed the spring and soon stopped before the door of the main building. Nevada and his companions walked to meet it, and soon were carrying the supplies into the house. When they returned to take off the pack saddles they saw a mounted man riding toward them through the gathering darkness, but paid no attention to him thinking him to be one of the men from an upper valley. He was too indistinct in the darkness to challenge attention, and the members of the gang hurried inside the house to storm the food-laden table.

"Saw Long Ben over in Ojos Verdes," said one of the pack-train men, while his plate was being refilled. "Asked him when he was comin' in here to start another game, an' leave some more of his money."

"A raw deal like he got must have set right heavy on Ben," said Carp, grinning. "I allus like to see a tin-horn lose his scalp."

"Aw, Ben's all right," spoke up another diner. "We shouldn't 'a' done that to him, nohow."

Nevada was eating silently, his mind occupied with matters of state, as behoved a leader; but now he raised his head and asked a question.

"Any news about Dan?" he inquired, meaning a man he had had in mind to put in Towson's place.

"Naw. Dan left Ojos Verdes three, four weeks ago, an' nobody knows where he went. Have to get somebody else, I reckon."

"Wouldn't be a heap surprised," said Nevada, ironically, and went back to his eating and his thoughts.

No one paid any attention to the sounds outside the house, sounds which explained themselves and which

were common enough. The rider who had been crossing the valley when the gang went in to supper now had reached the house and was unsaddling. They heard him slap the horse and heard the animal trot away. The jingle of buckles and chains moved to and through the doorway, and the sound of the falling saddle made one man glance up curiously to see which of the boys had talked himself into getting off; but he did not see one of the boys—he saw a tin-horn gambler, a stranger, making himself at home. Tex Ewalt had reached the end of his journey.

“What th’ hell!” Nevada exclaimed sharply, half rising from his chair, his hand streaking downward. The words acted like an alarm bell, every man at the table leaping up and staring at this quiet and self-possessed newcomer.

“Howdy,” drawled the stranger, smiling cheerfully. “Glad I got here in time to grab a tin plate. Hungry work, ridin’ all day; an’ damn thirsty, if you ask me. Name’s Tex Riley,” he explained. “What outfit’s this?”

“Draw up a chair, stranger,” said Nevada, his eyes trying to endorse the smile on his face.

## CHAPTER IX

### FROM OUT OF THE GRAVE

IT WAS seldom that Nevada allowed himself to show surprise, but the totally unexpected appearance of the stranger caught him a little off guard. While he readjusted himself to the situation, the visitor dropped his belt and gun on the saddle, loosened his underbelt a notch, and walked toward the table, nodding to Nevada, and smilingly following the direction of Carp, whose indicative thumb was pointing toward an empty chair. As the stranger seated himself, the cook came in, bearing cup, plate, and cutlery.

The expressions around the table ran the gamut from sheer amazement and frank unfriendliness to careless surprise and casual toleration. Nevada, master once more of mind and facial expression, pushed a platter toward the newcomer and smiled. Behind that smile was a riot of conjectures, a strong belief that no danger was to be expected from one man in the midst of the gang. Mature reflection would pass sentence on the visitor, and the following morning would be time enough to decide his fate. For a moment Nevada's face hardened and the glint in his eyes was merciless: this newcomer would not leave the buttes if any doubt

existed as to what he knew or suspected about this little ranch, or as to what his intentions might be.

Carp, chewing industriously, could hardly take his eyes from the dusty frock coat of the visitor. In his mind, frock coats meant only two things: parson or gambler. At thought of the latter calling he had to smile. One gambler had provided a deal of amusement.

"Parson?" inquired Carp, humorously, as he refilled his coffee-cup.

"No, hardly," drawled the stranger, his grin showing; "'though I can preach a sermon, an' have. If I was a parson I might send up a prayer over findin' you boys when things looked th' darkest. This country is shore hell for a stranger."

"How come you ever found us?" asked Carp, who seemed to be somewhat loquacious. "We don't see many strangers, in here."

"Shut up, an' give th' man time to feed," said Nevada. "You fill yore belly, stranger; time enough to swap gossip later. Charley!" he called, half turning in his chair; and when the cook appeared in the connecting doorway, Nevada pointed to the coffee-pot. "Take that out an' heat it. 'Tain't fit for a dog, cold as it is." He looked at the platters and pointed to one of them. "Fry some more bacon: want a man to starve?"

As they finished, the others one by one left the table and went to the other end of the long room to play cards, smoke, and talk. Nevada remained seated, leaning back comfortably in his chair, to keep the stranger company. His supper finished, Tex Riley



pushed back, and followed the "foreman" to join the others. Seated on a box and resting his back against the corner of a bunk, the visitor sighed with contentment, whittled a match and applied it energetically to his teeth. He seemed at peace with himself and with all the world. Even the suspicious men covertly watching him found nothing to indicate that this stranger knew himself to be in a very dangerous situation, where nothing short of death would pay forfeit for a false move, a careless slip of the tongue.

"Well," he said in pleased self-congratulation, "this shore beats campin' out in them damn cañons, without water. Good cook, that Chink."

"Charley-is a first-rate cook," admitted Nevada, smiling genially, as behoved a hospitable and honest foreman giving succour to a confused wanderer.

"Seems to me," he said, "that yo're right lucky, managin' to find a small place like this in all th' buttes. One wrong turn into any of them gorges, an' you'd never 'a' stumbled on to us. How'd you do it?"

"I come in southwest of Ojos Verdes," answered the visitor. "Long Ben told me to go 'round; but I shore reckoned I knowed more than him, so I rode right in, aimin' to cut off, an' save a lot of time an' ridin'. Ben didn't say there was so many cañons, or that they was so damn confusin'; sometimes a man can be too tight-mouthed. He might 'a' warned me, anyhow!"

"Headin' southeast for th' lower river settlements?" asked Nevada, with child-like innocence. If this stranger had any reason to hide his motives for riding into the buttes he would be quick to admit that Nevada had

named his course and desire. If he did so, his own admission of wanting to take a cut-off would be damning, since it would lead him in another direction.

"No," answered Tex, casually. "I was headin' east. I don't exactly like them river settlements. I figgered on cuttin' straight acrost. There used to be drive trails, over east, an' some ranches. Funny how a man can make a fool of hisself. I been ridin' 'round th' whole damn country for more'n twenty years, an' I reckoned I shore knowed how to take care of myself; but once I left that plain I was plumb lost inside an hour. If I hadn't stumbled on to a hoss trail, with fresh prints on it, th' Lord only knows where I would 'a' wound up. Only had a day's grub an' water with me, an' none a-tall, of course, for th' hoss." He shook his head grimly. "Next time I travel around in this part of th' country I'll go where I'm told."

"Got friends over east?" asked Nevada, carelessly.

"Not that I know of; but there might be. I'm allus findin' 'em, mostly where I ain't expectin' to. Ever since my old stampin' grounds began to get so damn civilized, there's quite some fellers I used to know that have got out."

He placed a hand complacently on his stomach, and recrossed his legs.

"I was aimin' to prospect around a little, over east, an' then move south by easy stages."

"Knowed Long Ben very long?" asked Nevada.

"Near twenty years. We never was very thick, 'though we used to ride for th' same—outfit—before folks got to stickin' their long noses in where they

didn't belong. When th' break came I jumped straight north, but Ben must 'a' slid out in another direction. Run acrost him, ten years ago, in th' Big Pine rush. We was partners, sort of, till th' camp petered out; but I reckon we was both purty well satisfied to split. Lost track of him entire till I bumped into him over at Ojos Verdes." He grinned frankly. "I figgered on stayin' awhile, over there, to get a little more money; but Ben had got there first, an' he didn't act very sociable."

"Three card?" asked Nevada, mildly curious.

"'Most anythin'," said Tex, carelessly. "Three card, three shell, draw or stud-hoss. 'Tain't what it used to be, mister. Folks are gettin' sort of tame an' settled. Too many settlers, with families. They work hard all day an' like to sleep nights. Scratchin' for every dollar they get, an' they hang on to it like there wasn't never goin' to be another. I made th' same mistake: got married. Next thing I knowed I was on th' straight an' narrer, punchin' cows for a bare livin'." He chuckled. "Been punchin' ever since. Then I got plumb tired." He waved at the saddle bags, and grinned. "Free man, now; 'less she gets track of me. I got a nice little outfit in there, an' I ought to pick up some easy money on my way. Only thing that bothers me is that I ain't got a good stake. If I hit a streak of bad luck I can't ride it through. I hoped to pick that up over in Ojos Verdes, but Ben bellered like a calf with a hot iron on its skin. What outfit's this, friend?"

"It's a double outfit," answered Nevada without hesitation. He knew how to account for more than one brand in this main valley; and the stranger would

not see any of the others. "Boys from two outfits, summer-grazin' in here. Old man stumbled on to this place by accident, an' nothin' would do but shove a herd in here. Neighbour caught th' same disease, threw in a bunch of his cattle, an' here we are, prisoners for th' season with a lot of damn cows for company."

Tex was admiring the facile ease of this practised liar and felt that he was facing a peer.

"We're holdin' SW an' Circle Star cattle," volunteered Carp before any one could stop him. He did no harm, however, for there were very few of any other brands in this valley. Nevada's glance made him stiffen a little, however, and he went to his bunk to hunt for some imaginary object.

"Who-all did you know, back south?" asked Nevada carelessly, as though to help along what might become a limping conversation; but his careless question was loaded with danger.

Tex laughed.

"Lot's of folks," he answered, and named a dozen. "They're all old-timers. Th' new breed don't amount to very much, I reckon. You take th' old days, now. I can remember when I was in Texas, once—up in that Cunningham Lake section, hardly before anybody knowed anythin' about it. What's more, I was there when that big cattle fight took place. Saw th' whole thing, or nearly th' whole thing. That was where Deacon Rankin was killed, an' Trendley turned over to that damned McAllister feller." His eyes shone, his face was hard and grave, and his whole bearing bespoke repressed excitement. "It makes me riled to

this day when I think about it. I'm tellin' you *hombres* that that was a *fight* as *was* a fight!"

Nevada's interest flamed, and he leaned forward.

"I've heard a lot about that, first an' last; but no two stories was alike," he said. "Who was th' fellers on th' short end?" Nothing about him gave any indication that this was another trap.

"Let's see," said Tex, cogitating. "There was Jack Dorman, Billy Jackson, Shorty Danvers, Charley Teal, a feller by th' name of Nolan, an' another feller among 'em that was lynched. Then there was Apache Gordon, Hughes, O'Brien, Schmidt, an' about twenty others. They went down fightin'. Only one man got away, an' that was a feller by th' name of Tom Wilkins." He checked himself, considered a moment, and appeared to be reassured about something.

"Yo're mistaken there," said Nevada, pleasantly. "Wilkins didn't get away. He was killed." He paused a moment. "Nobody ever saw him again."

"He wasn't killed; he got away," said Tex positively. Somehow, he gave the impression that he was becoming tense, giving it in such a way that only to a suspicious, anxious mind would it be apparent.

"Hey, Gila," said Nevada, quietly, turning to a puncher who now was sitting on the edge of his chair. "Wasn't Tom Wilkins killed in that fight?"

Gila had been leaning forward, drinking in every word of this interesting conversation, eager to take part in it. Perhaps that was why his answer sounded explosive.

"Shore he was!" he exclaimed. "*Every* body on that side was killed! Not one of 'em got away"!



Tex was beginning to get excited, to be carried away by the sudden heat of this argument, which is a common enough failing in mankind.

"No, sir! He got away, I tell you!" he retorted with spirit. "I reckon I ought to know: didn't I *see* it?"

This admission was rated as a mistake by the listeners, but Tex did not appear to realize what he had said.

"How do you know he got away?" demanded Gila obstinately, his face growing red under its coating of tan.

"Because I do!" retorted Tex, dogmatically. "He saw what th' end was goin' to be, an' on th' very last night he rolled to th' edge of th' crick, into it, an' floated downstream with only his nose above water. Kept on goin', pushin' hisself through shallows an' off th' sand bars, till he reckoned he was far enough; an' then he started out on foot, back to th' settlements."

"He was a hell of a long way from th' settlements," sneered Gila.

"Yes, he was," admitted Tex. "It took him eight days of steady ploddin', livin' on berries an' leaves an' grass, an' he damn near died."

He closed his eyes, and apparently did not see the peculiar expressions which flashed over two faces in the group. He was excited, his voice harsh and growing steadily louder. One would have thought that it was he who had made that journey.

"Dragged hisself, near dead, up to a cow outfit that was out huntin' mavericks," he continued. "Didn't know but what they might shoot him; but he had to risk that. He didn't know that they hadn't heard



anythin' about th' fight. He figgered it would be better to be shot or hung, than to starve or die of thirst. His feet an' hands an' knees was raw an' bleedin', an' he couldn't 'a' made another five miles, nohow."

Again he closed his eyes and a slight shiver swept over him. He sighed as he opened them and looked around.

"Yes, sir: Tom Wilkins got away; but he had a damn narrer squeak. An' he shore had enough of Texas to last him for many years."

Gila, his eyes riveted accusingly on those of the speaker, risked another fraction of an inch and almost slid off the chair. An amazing suspicion was raging in his mind, and he sought confirmation of it; but he was too wise to ask a direct question. There were other and better ways, although slower and roundabout, of getting at the truth.

"Yo're loco!" he cried, his voice pitching high. "There was three sheriffs huntin' Wilkins, an' they all quit sudden when th' word come in. He was killed! They wouldn't 'a' stopped huntin' him if he wasn't!"

"Did you ever see Tom Wilkins?" demanded the visitor, trying to appear to be vitally interested in his question. He put it as a challenge; but that fooled neither Nevada nor Gila. Had he claimed to be that same Tom Wilkins, not a man present would have believed him; now he was trying, somewhat clumsily, to wriggle out of his mistake and to convince them that he was not Tom Wilkins, knowing that they would not believe him in this.

"No, I didn't!" admitted Gila, defiantly, not knowing

the genuine relief he had given to the questioner, a relief that was almost like a reprieve to a doomed man.

"*I* didn't; but them sheriffs did! They quit huntin' him! Would they 'a' done that if he was not dead?"

Nevada said it for his guest, and something which his guest might not have dared to say.

"Huh! That don't prove nothin'," muttered the "foreman," his low voice carrying distinctly through the now silent room. His eyes were on the stranger, probing, searching; and he smiled inwardly as the visitor's eyes turned away from his own for a moment. Then the suggestion of evasion in Tex's look turned suddenly to assurance, but there was some quality of desperation in it. "They would 'a' quit huntin' him if they *thought* he was dead; an' nobody never claimed that he wasn't, till right now."

Tex arose in his excitement, looking from Nevada to Gila, and at the latter he shook an emphatic finger.

"That's just it! Tom told me he knowed them sheriffs would quit when they learned he was dead. They were three damn fools, an' bitter as wolves; but they knowed enough not to chase a man that was dead! An' he let 'em keep right on thinkin' he was dead, you betcha! He stole a hoss an' run for it as fast an' straight as he could travel. Jumped straight north on th' shortest line, took another name, in a new an' strange part of th' country, an' he learned another way of makin' a livin'."

Nevada was thinking of this visitor's former statement that he, himself, had "jumped straight north" and that he had become a gambler. Now he leaned

back in the chair again, willing to be lost sight of and to let Gila carry on the attack. His glance and furtive signal already had told Gila what to do, and the puncher went to work.

"Just th' same," growled Gila, sullenly—"just th' same, them sheriffs wouldn't 'a' quit unless they *knowed* Wilkins was dead."

"Don't be a jackass, Gila!" snapped Tex. "They only knowed what they was told! Can't you understand nothin' a-tall?"

"I understand a hell of a lot, Mr. Riley," sneered Gila pugnaciously, and half rising. "We'll soon see who's th' jackass. You reckon you know all about that fight. Said you was there, at th' time. There wasn't nobody there, *then*, that wasn't in it. All right: *which side was you on?*"

Nevada's eyes were closed, apparently; but at this question the lowered lids parted the width of another hair, and he watched the visitor even more closely. Gila had sprung a trap.

This little gathering, these two outfits, were supposed to be made up of honest men, so far as the visitor's knowledge went; and to answer that question for honest men would be the proper course to take. To admit that he was among the outlaws in that old fight would be to jeopardize his standing among honest men, and to jeopardize it far more than being a tin-horn gambler would jeopardize it. He did not dare to let his companions know that he knew they were cattle thieves; ignorance of their occupation was an additional safeguard for a stranger who had stumbled upon them.

Yet he had to let them guess, to lead them to suspect that he had fought on the side of the cattle thieves, as Tom Wilkins had fought. Once they believed this, they would more easily believe that he was Tom Wilkins, a thief like themselves. And only one cattle thief had escaped from that old fight.

Tex glared at the questioner.

"Reckon that's my business! I was in that fight, I was a cussed lucky man, an' that's enough for you to know."

"*Was* you?" sneered Gila, looking triumphantly around the circle, and then swiftly facing about to fire his big gun. "All right—you *was*. We admit that for th' sake of argument. You *was*: then tell us about it! You reckon we're still jugglin' nursin' bottles, an' playin' with our toes?" He laughed nastily and leaned back. "Go ahead, Mr. *Riley*: tell us about it, if you was in it. I heard all about that fight, an' heard it from a man that was on th' winnin' side; go ahead an' tell us about it!" he jeered.

The jeering laugh stung the visitor, whose face now was that of a fighting man, a man fighting for his life. He looked appealingly at Nevada, and what he saw on that countenance made him lick his lips.

"Tell us about it!" snapped the "foreman," his eyes blazing. All the other traps had been sprung in vain: this one might not miss. The story of that fight would be told from the angle from which it had been viewed, or would strongly reflect it.

"Yes—*tell* it!" jeered Gila, looking triumphantly at his friends.

"All right, Gila," drawled Tex, insultingly. "Set back, shut yore mouth, an' *listen*. I'll tell you about it, every move of it, up to th' very last night, when I was sent away with a message; but I was told what happened after that. Next time you'll mebbby know what yo're talkin' about before you try to make a fool of a man twice yore age. Here goes," and he launched into the story, which he had heard again and again and from more than one source.

Keeping in mind that he must pretend to believe his companions to be honest cow men, he must pretend to tell the tale from the side of the attacking ranchers and not from the side of the beleaguered and defeated cattle thieves; and in telling it from this point of view he must stumble a little, and let it be realized that he was trying to tell it from the side he had not been on. This would require artistry, all the artistry which canny Tex Ewalt could bring to bear, and the difficulties were increased by the fact that he had not been in that fight on either side.

Being a gripping story, and one which he was supposed to have lived, it must not halt or drag if it was to carry conviction; his excitement must be repressed, and yet urge him to speak swiftly, but surely. So it must go if he was telling it to honest men, who would be in sympathy with the outraged ranchers who had won that fight; but to convince these men, against his own words, that he had been on the side of the thieves, it must halt and drag in places, except where he purposefully seemed to forget himself and speak from the point of view of the cattle thieves.



When he plunged into it he called on all the resources of an educated man, which he was; he brought to his aid the benefit of years of experience, and he had not gone far into the recital before he was living that fight; and as he warmed up and let his excitement slowly possess him more and more, he gradually swung into the point of view of the thieves; he more and more forgot that he was supposed to have been an attacker, and not a defender of that little clearing in the bend of the creek. As he warmed, so warmed his audience, one by one joining in that fight in spirit. Episode by episode, he led them on, painting the deadly Red Connors up in a tree with his merciless rifle over a limb; painting every scene, the flare of the mounting flames, the crack of the guns, the agonies of the wounded and dying men, sweeping up to the coming of darkness on that last fateful day; and by now he had reversed his perspective, his position lost in the impelling surge of emotion. He did not appear to realize how he had blundered, how he had slowly but surely told the tale from the lips of a cattle thief, how he had his pictures through the eyes of a rustler. Certainly, no man in the room knew that he had artfully and deliberately changed sides to make himself out to be a thief like themselves. He had known strains in his eventful life, but never such a strain as this: trying to run backward by going forward; trying to prove a thing by disproving it.

Then he came to the last night, and the few following hours of the last day, the day when Tom Wilkins was supposed to be fleeing over the harsh plains, far from

the scene of the fighting, and, therefore, not personally knowing what took place during those fateful hours. Never in his life had Tex Ewalt played a hand as masterfully as he played the one he now held. Here he began to falter, to stumble, to grope, to become uncertain, and to become increasingly anxious, apparently, because he realized his lack of accurate knowledge.

If he were now before a jury of honest men, being tried formally for the crimes of cattle stealing and homicide, he here began to weave the rope which would hang him. One could plainly sense that he was only telling a story that he had heard, speaking from hearsay. Had he been on the side of the ranchmen he would not have stumbled and halted. To give excuse for this halting and stumbling he had, earlier, told them that he had been sent away with a message on that last day; this would have been held to be a subterfuge, and it was held so by his present audience. He appeared to be searching for a way out, grabbing wildly for a straw; and in that error which panic brings he grabbed for the wrong straw, *if his audience had been honest*.

He burst abruptly into the story of Tom Wilkins's escape, an escape which was purely mythical; and even if true, an escape which only one man could have told about with such detail and such gripping realism. Before he knew it, apparently, he had become Tom Wilkins; the identity rang true in every word and inflection; showed itself in every unconscious gesture; and then he suddenly came to his senses, realizing all at once what he had done, what he had said to these honest cow men. The knowledge seemed to appal him.

His voice faltered and grew silent. He seemed surprised that he was on his feet, and not on the box he had been seated on. Looking anxiously from face to face, he did not dare to turn his head, and with his left hand he felt behind him until it struck the box. He sat down hard and suddenly, wiped his perspiring face with a soiled bandanna, and then relaxed. Every man in the room now knew who he was and what he had been, and they would hold to their knowledge against all denials and oaths.

There was no pretense, however, in the perspiration, in the relaxation. Never had a man done a harder day's work than Tex Ewalt had performed in that scant half hour. And in that scant half hour of savage striving to be regarded as an honest man, he had proved himself to be a thief, a thief among thieves, which had been his aim; he had proved it against all his apparent efforts to prove the contrary. And in that proving he saved his life, as he knew he had to save it; and he had won a confidence which he could have won so surely in no other way.

Now he sat limp and hopeless, acting to the very end to clinch the nail he had driven; now he looked slowly about him, trying to smile. The smile was pitiful, a ghastly pretense.

"Got a little excited, I reckon," he said somewhat stupidly.

They did not answer him. The silence was broken only by the deep breathing of men slowly returning to the present hour and minute; coming back to enjoy a huge and ridiculous joke, which to their way of

thinking had been anything but a joke to the man most concerned. A foot moved scrapingly on the sand of the floor, rasping loudly; someone blew out a gusty breath of relief, and at the sound there came a general stirring, swift movements of relief from hitherto unrealized cramped positions. Grins struggled here and there, grins which, to a guilty mind, could mean only one thing.

Still acting, Tex read them as he would have read them to make his part convincing. He spoke again, his voice tired, apathetic, weary, and almost without inflection.

"I take back that jackass I called you, Gila," he said slowly. "I reckon *you* ain't th' jackass. I had no reason to call you that. Well," he continued, a faint gleam coming into his eyes, "it don't make much difference, I reckon: I'll be ridin' on ag'in in th' mornin'," he ended, lamely, as though expressing a vital hope he could not believe; but the hope flared higher as he watched to see what the words would bring forth.

"Reckon mebby you better stay here awhile," said Nevada, trying to speak sternly and to hide his mirth.

Tex stiffened a trifle, and tried to find some pleasure in this expected invitation; trying to hide the fear, which, among honest men, would have been real and pressing. Inwardly, he thrilled with triumph: he had fooled them all. The Tex Ewalt of the old days had come to life again, without the loss of a single trick of cleverness.

"Why, that's right kind of you," he muttered, squirming a little and letting them see that he was trying not to look at his saddle and at the open door so close to

him, and yet so far away. "Right kind of you." He glanced at Gila. "I had no reason to call you any names, Gila."

Gila cleared his throat and wriggled to a more comfortable position.

"That's all right, Riley; I got on th' prod, myself. That's just between us two, an' it's all right. I'm admittin' that you shore was there in that fight; an' I ain't askin' which side you was on. That's yore own affair."

Gila did not think it necessary to explain that he now knew, without even the shadow of a doubt, which side the worried Mr. Riley had been on. He now knew even more than that: he knew a secret which had been carefully hidden for many years; and he was smiling at the guile of certain hard-headed Texan sheriffs. He flashed a quick look at Nevada, and found that person's eyes on him; and he saw the quiver of a knowing smile swiftly fading on Nevada's face.

The leader turned slowly from Gila and looked at the visitor.

"Did you ever see Wilkins after that fight?" he asked, notwithstanding the fact that Riley already had said that he had seen Wilkins.

Tex nodded wearily and changed the subject, speaking with pretended assurance.

"Just what's east of here, nowadays, friend?" he asked. "Do you reckon th' pickin's are worth goin' after?" He was bluffing, taking it for granted that he would be allowed to go east after the pickings.

"You better not go back where you was aimin' for," warned Nevada, and then answered the visitor's ques-



tion. "Pickin's? It all depends on what kind of pickin's, I reckon. What kind was you thinkin' about?"

Tex glanced down at his saddle bags.

"Why, winnin's, of course," he answered, a little surprised; but again his expression showed a trace of fear. "There's allus a bunch of smart-Alecks hangin' 'round th' saloons, 'specially after dark, thinkin' they know everythin' there is to know about draw an' studhoss."

Nevada wanted to look into those saddle bags, to see if this guest had a gambling outfit, and also to find out if he was a creditable gambler, a gambler good enough to have made his living for years at that calling. This, however, could wait until later. He raised his hand to his forehead, as though weary, and peered intently between two fingers.

"I can give you th' name of one smart-Aleck that lives east of here—Johnny Nelson!"

Tex's face grew hard and his hand started toward the front of his coat, a very short and brief movement, checked almost as soon as begun; and a very significant movement whether checked or not. To these men it meant that a shoulder holster lay under that coat. His clenched left hand slowly opened.

"That so?" trying not to reveal his sudden animosity.

"Shore is," said Nevada, smiling. "You take things easy, Tex. We'd just as soon call you Tex Riley as any other name. Twenty years is a long time, an' lots of things get forgot. You've had a tryin' day an' night. Reckon you'd like to crawl into a bunk an' get a good sleep. We can talk to-morrow, if we want to."

Tex's weary face showed his relief, and he arose and went to his saddle. Unrolling his blankets, he arose to his full height, looked around the room, estimating the bunks, and sighed gratefully. Several of them were bare, and, therefore, not in use.

"Take Towson's over there in th' corner," said Nevada. "He won't need it no more. Come to think of it, I reckon we all better turn in."

Tex dragged the saddle over beside the bunk, took the slicker-wrapped bundle from it and shoved it well under the berth, pushing the saddle bags after it. He removed his coat, careless of the shoulder holster which showed itself to curious and knowing eyes. He was dead tired, so tired that he cared for nothing but to get to sleep. Covert glances saw the shoulder rigging, and the flat weapon nestling in the sheath; amused looks passed between the men, but no comment was made. Comment was entirely unnecessary; and, besides, words are revealing to all who hear them, while thoughts are not telltales; and every man in that room was thinking, even to the stranger. If the truth were known, he was thinking harder than any of the others, and in his heart exulting. Tom Wilkins had been dead for many years, and none of these men ever had seen him. There was no longer any doubt in Tex's mind that he was the Tex of the old days, once more adrift in his tight little boat of wits, a boat sufficient to carry him far and safely. More than that, he hoped to control the winds which wafted him, the currents which pulled him; and what adventuring traveller can ask more than that?

## CHAPTER X

### MARKING TIME

TEX opened his eyes and looked around the room, orienting himself without difficulty. The bunk-house was quiet, lacking the customary bustle of dressing men or feeding men; the daylight had a quality about it that was strange to a man whose usual waking hour was around sun-up. Quiet voices, seemingly from a distance, fell upon his ear. He stretched luxuriously and sat up in the bunk, ducking his head from force of habit, and thus missing the planks over him. His roving glance settled on his clothes with a little suspicion, but there was nothing to warrant it. They seemed to be exactly as he had left them, as, in truth, they were. The voices swelled a little, and he recognized one of them. It belonged to Carp, and came from outside the house, from the rear, where the cañon wall curved in. Dressing leisurely, he heard a quiet step and looked up to see the Chinese cook peering at him from the door of the gallery leading to the kitchen.

"Hab bleasfast damn quick, you savvy?" asked the cook, grinning.

"Quicker th' better," answered Tex, smiling. The thought of food sent his appetite up several degrees, and it became clamorous. Going outside, he became

busy at the wash bench, and soon was ready to destroy large quantities of Charlie's cooking. He ate in solitude, no one coming into the house. The voices outside went on monotonously in a lazy conversation. When he had finished eating, Tex went back to his bunk, drew out the saddle bags, took what he wanted from them, and shoved them back again. Opening a new sack of tobacco, he rolled a cigarette and then wandered out of the house, wearing his two thigh guns, but leaving the shoulder holster and its weapon on a nail above his soiled pillow.

Turning the corner of the building, he found himself passing the kitchen, which was the second of the three buildings, but connected to the main house by a covered way. He saw Carp and his companions seated cross-legged on a small patch of grass between the cliff and the houses. Beyond the grass was a matted mass of dead weeds, running solidly to the base of the cliff and a few feet up, where they connected with a shallow vertical crevice which cut down from the top of the mesa and in which were sagebrush and greasewood, with a line of dead and living cedars.

Instantly he remembered the signal he was to send aloft to notify Hopalong and his companions of the location of the rustlers' headquarters. His glance around was cursory, and it did not pause until it settled on the faces of the contented punchers loafing in the shadow of the towering wall. Their attitude was different from what it had been the night before. They all were at ease in his presence and they seemed to be mildly amused about something. They grinned a

welcome and indicated that he join them and sit down, and they continued their light, careless banter with its veiled but harmless barbs at each other's expense. Tex thought that the wounded among them were not nearly as wounded when Nevada was absent; and he was correct in this, for their wounds had healed. He was glad that Nevada was not with them, and somehow this seemed to be a tacit admission that he had nothing to fear. And the fact that Nevada had allowed the careless and loquacious Carp to talk uncensored was another small assurance of passive friendliness. Evidently, Nevada was quite certain that he had nothing to fear from Tex Riley.

"Riley," said Carp, chuckling, "if you can play cards like you can sleep, there ain't nobody can teach you nothin', not even us. Had yore breakfast?"

"Yes," answered Tex complacently; "an' if I can play cards as good as that Chink can cook, there ain't nobody can teach me nothin', neither."

"Charley's a bang-up cook," said Elbows, shifting for comfort.

"Reckoned I'd have to eat yore breakfast for you," said Carp, pinching out the stub of his cigarette before throwing it away. The dead and broken butt landed in a mass of dried grass where it fell out of sight and did no harm. Tex was idly watching it. "You shore reminded me of an old sawmill, back where I was borned," continued Carp. "You shore did." He was now looking critically at his visitor's shirt and in his mind's eye seeing the shoulder rigging. "I see you left it off. Don't them shoulder outfits sorta chafe you, like?"



"Sometimes words chafe a hull lot more," suggested Irish, pointedly. "Carp, you shore can talk about more things in one breath than any man I ever saw.

"You ain't met very many men, have you?" countered Carp, grinning.

Tex smiled and pulled up a grass stem, slowly weaving it into a ring; but the smile was a little strained. It gave the impression that he was not quite certain of his ground, not sure of what would be the final reaction to the vivid story of the night before. He must let them think that he was worried, as an admitted cattle thief might well be in the presence of an honest outfit.

"Words don't chafe to amount to nothin'," he said, "except, sometimes, to th' feller that speaks 'em. They chafe more when th' feller is a damn fool. An' I'm admittin' that Gila is a right clever person. Anybody that calls Gila a jackass purty near comes to bein' one hisself." He grinned a little at the quiet smiles that blossomed in reply to this statement, grinned self-consciously, but replied to Carp. "Yes, Carp," he said after the briefest of pauses, "a shoulder holster does chafe in hot weather, an' while it's new an' stiff; but a feller gets used to it after it gets used to him, an' then it ain't hardly noticed no more."

He let his right hand reach up inquiringly toward his left shoulder as though uncomfortable because of the lack of the harness, and swiftly let it drop again. As an unconscious motion it was well acted. The position in which he had seated himself left the third man off at one side, and it put the brush-filled crevice of the cliff out of his direct range of vision. He shifted to a

position from whence he had the three men before him, and the crevice, as well; and his mind went back to the careless toss of the dead cigarette end. It was not a bad idea, if a better did not present itself. Many serious fires have been lit by cigarettes, even from the hands of men who should have known better.

Carp rolled himself a new smoke, lit it, and recrossed his legs.

"Riley, you don't know how lucky you was, last night," he said. "You don't know how lucky you are right now." He was thinking of the test which Tex Riley had passed through without knowing that he was passing through it, or at least believing that the test was being conducted from the opposite angle. His two friends knew exactly the meaning he had in mind; but Tex Riley was not supposed to know it.

Tex chose to understand it from the only point which a stranger would understand it, and he realized keenly that he was still in a position which required unceasing alertness. His acting had only begun.

"I know I was lucky," he admitted. "Why, a man might wander around in those cañons till he died of thirst, never gettin' sight of any horizon to help him, an' mebbey not gettin' more than a few miles from his startin' point, no matter how long he travelled. If you boys knew how I felt when I found those fresh hoss tracks, an' then saw th' light in this buildin', you'd shore know how lucky I thought I was." He slowly shook his head. "I never reckoned I could get lost nowhere under th' open sky. I know better now."

Elbows whittled himself a toothpick from the end of

a match, plied it energetically for a moment, and then entered into the conversation.

"I've been in here quite some time, myself," he said, "an' I still stick to th' section that I know. When I go to town I go just one way, an' I come back that way. There's a couple of water pockets between here an' Ojos Verdes, if you know where to turn to find 'em. I know where to turn, an' that's enough for me. Soon's I get back on th' reg'lar trail, I keep a-goin'."

Irish added to his information, colouring it slightly for its effect, and also because the visitor had not been officially made a member of the gang.

"There ain't no water nowhere outside these valleys in here, except along th' north trail that we use in drivin' in here an' movin' out. We only use that trail spring an' fall. I don't believe we could trail th' herds out of here except in them two seasons. It's near a hundred miles, twistin' like a snake, an' every mile of it is sun cursed. Th' sand an' alkali outside th' buttes don't help none, I'm tellin' you." He smiled a little as he looked at Tex. "Yo're a gambler, but you was more of a gambler than you knowed when you tackled this chunk of country."

Carp's eyes twinkled at this double-edged remark, and he took the opportunity offered to change the subject to another line.

"An' so yo're a gambler, huh? A reg'lar gambler," he said, grinning provocatively.

"I've been called one," said Tex, calmly. He was wondering where Hopalong was at this moment, how far away he was. To signal needlessly would be to

jeopardize the whole game; for such signals as he had to depend upon could not be used more than once or twice. The first fire might pass as an accident, but the second would be a deadly gamble, and there was no telling what might grow out of it. These thoughts flashed through his mind in a moment, and occasioned but a slight pause in his words. "Of course, I'm not as good as I used to be," he admitted. "A man's got to keep in practice, an' there was a long time when I was punchin' cattle. However, I'm good enough, right now, not to do no worryin'," he boasted.

"We got a deck of cards in th' house, somewhere," said Carp, keeping his face grave, and not looking at his friends, whose faces, also, were grave. "I was hopin' we could have a little game to-night; but I reckon that'll have to wait. We'll have one purty soon, though."

He was thinking of a deck of cards lying on a shelf in the bunkhouse. They had been taken from the indignant person of Long Ben, of Ojos Verdes. Their former owner had been forced to reveal and explain the artistic additions to the regular markings on the backs of certain cards, additions so well done as to speak very highly of the artist's skill. Every man in the outfit knew those markings, and therefore the deck had not been used in their regular playing; but there now loomed up the promise of a night filled with profit and hilarity. No one among them believed that Tex Riley was as near broke as he admitted; but after a night's play with the trained deck, it was Carp's belief that the visitor would be a pauper. Carp could hardly

wait to get this professional gambler in a game, and he sensed the same eagerness in his friends.

"Well," said Tex, cogitating, his face expressing a little embarrassment and concern, "of course, I'll play any time you boys want me to. You see, it ain't as if you don't know what yo're up against. I've told you that I'm a gambler; now, for yore own good, I'm tellin' you that I'm a first-class gambler; too good a gambler to take advantage of folks like you. Comin' right down to cases, I'd a lot rather watch you fellers play among yoreselves."

"That's right kind of you," said Elbows, sarcastically; "but how do you know that we don't play as good a game?"

"No amatchure can buck a good professional," replied Tex. "That's fact, an' I'm tellin' it to you. You can take my word for it."

Carp snorted derisively.

"We heard you, Riley; an' we know that yo're a professional gambler; but we play a right rambunctious game ourselves, let me tell you. We're free an' openly givin' you th' chance to get that little stake you said you needed. We'll mebbly have to pull leather before we get through ridin' you, but if we do, we'll shore pull it for ourselves. We're all aimin' to give you th' chance to get that little stake right here in th' buttes."

"Well, I need a good stake before I can get th' right kind of action after I leave here," said Tex, taking it for granted that he was going to be allowed to leave; "but I don't want to take it from you boys. If you



won't have it no other way, I'll play any time you want, but I'm hopin' you make th' stakes small. While I don't want yore money, at th' same time I can't afford to play careless an' lose my own. In other words, I dassn't lose, an' don't want to win."

Carp's grin had grown steadily, until now it threatened calamity to his face. He looked at Elbows and Irish, whose grins were as enfolding as his own. They had a joke up their sleeves that was entirely too good to keep up there, and they simply had to pull it down. To trim a professional gambler with a professional gambler's own tools promised a rare entertainment; and, to their credit, let it be understood that, at this moment, the value of their possible winnings was decidedly of secondary consideration.

Elbows reached for tobacco and papers, his eyes on the guest.

"We savvy how you feel about winnin' an' losin'," he said, rolling a cigarette entirely by the sense of touch. "We also appreciates yore frank warnin's. It does you proud. Now, howsomever, let me tell you that we shore got plenty of matches. We can use 'em, an' we can call 'em anythin' you want to. Penny ante ain't what you might call wild an' reckless, but sometimes it's lots of fun. Why, Riley," he said, pointing at Carp, "there's a man, right there that's as good a gambler as I ever saw. We all play a purty good game, if I *do* say it."

"A first-class professional would strip you to yore skin," said Tex.

"Not hardly at penny ante," said Irish.

"I suppose you got cards in them saddlebags of yourn," suggested Carp.

"Yes, I have," admitted Tex, calmly. "I see yore drift, Carp. I've got several packs; but seein' that I'm a professional gambler, I don't expect you boys to gamble with 'em. There ain't no marks on 'em, but I ain't expectin' you to believe that; an' to prove that I don't want you to believe it an' that I don't want you to play with 'em, I'm sayin' that what cards we play with won't be those decks. We won't, not even if you want to take chances with 'em. Any night you want to pass away th' time playin' penny ante, five-cent limit, I'll be agreeable. With stakes like that I can let myself out without no reserve, an' no remorse." He looked up to see the cook come to the kitchen door with a pan of wood ashes and throw them carelessly into the weeds.

"Charley!" snapped Carp, half arising, his eyes on the spreading dust cloud. "You know what you've been told about throwin' ashes out here! Want to set th' place on fire? If th' boss catches you at that he'll lick hell outa you!"

"No fire; allee same out," said Charley, grinning and ducking his head. "Old ashee, flom las' night. Allee same out. No ketchum fire."

"All right," said Carp, his gaze on the weeds. "You want to be damn shore of that."

"Charley's a careful man," said Tex in the cook's defence. "He wouldn't throw out hot ashes."

"Cholly allee same careful; no ketchum fire," laughed the cook, ducking back into the kitchen.

"Yeah. He's careful—like hell!" said Irish. "Two

years ago he gave us one damn busy quarter of an hour. If you don't stop it in that time you'll never stop it. His ashes was allee same cold that time, too; but they set th' weeds on fire, just th' same." He stopped, listened and leaned back to try to peer past the end of the kitchen. The sounds of a loping horse grew plainly audible and became steadily louder.

"Th' boss," said Elbows, sighing. "Reckon he's tumbled about these here wounds of ourn; an' I reckon that he's found work for our idle han's to do."

"Shore he has, which you've knowed all day," remarked Carp. "We got to go up in Number Three an' relieve Concho an' a couple more. Don't say nothin' about them ashes."

Elbows grunted disagreeably and frowned.

"I don't mind takin' my shift; but I shore do mind relievin' that Concho coyote." He yawned and stretched. "He ain't got no black fur with no white stripe down his back, but that's all he needs to be a skunk, an' a hydrophoby skunk, at that."

"You oughta let that grudge die out," reproved Carp. "First thing you know, it'll blaze up an' there'll be th' devil to pay."

"Yeah; an' I know what to pay him with," growled Elbows. "I'll pay him with a two-laigged polecat." He savagely tore up a bit of grass and twisted it. "An' I won't be forgettin' his friend Layton, neither, when I do it."

"You keep yore eyes on Concho, if that time comes," said Carp. "I'll do th' lookin' out for Layton, if he makes a play."

## CHAPTER XI

### AN ACCEPTABLE BASIS

NEVADA rode around the end of the kitchen, drew rein, and smiled down on the lazy four. "Lot of hard-workin' cow wrastlers," he said, dismounting. He dropped the reins over the horse's head and leaned comfortably against the wall. Then his gaze settled on the visitor.

"Well, Riley, have a good sleep?"

"Shore did," answered Tex. "Had a long, quiet rest; an' then I woke up, had my breakfast, an' found myself plumb in danger of losin' my shirt."

"I'm not a heap surprised; it looks a lot better than Carp's, an' he never cares whose shirt he takes," replied the foreman. "How'd you get it back ag'in?"

"Oh, ~~he~~ ain't took it, *yet*," explained Tex, smiling. "He's just layin' th' trail. Aims to get me in a game an' take everythin' I own."

"No, not everythin'," corrected Carp. "You can keep that shoulder outfit. I like my gun where my hand brushes it." He chuckled. "But I got my eye on yore saddle; mine's near wore out."

Nevada laughed again, and then his face became sober.

"Riley, I seem to remember you sayin' that you was a cow hand?"

"You remember right."

"Well, we're a little short-handed," continued Nevada. "Towson ain't with us no more. There ain't work enough for no fourteen lazy riders, ordinary; but th' work's heaped up a little, an' I sorta like even numbers."

"Even numbers bein' anythin' that ain't thirteen," explained Carp.

"Wonder how you'd feel about takin' Towson's place," went on Nevada, ignoring the interruption, "an' helpin' us out with a bunch of cattle? Mebby you'd like to try yore hand with rope or iron for a few days?"

"Do anythin' I can to help you out," said Tex, hiding his eagerness. He would do anything he could to help Nevada and his whole gang out—of the world.

"Thought mebby you would. Y'see, we been comin' in here summer-grazin' for quite some years. Lots of cattle have strayed in that time. Got into th' side cañons an' valleys, an' bred. We've rounded up quite a bunch, an' are goin' to brand 'em. Give you a chance to pick up a little money, an' help us at th' same time."

"Hell!" growled Tex. "I don't want no money."

"You'll get it, just th' same; an' you'll shore earn it, too," said Nevada, pushing from the wall. He took the reins and turned. "Come in th' house till I dig up some work clothes for you."

"I'm joinin' this party," said Carp, arising with



alacrity. "When you start diggin' up clothes, I shore aim to be right on hand an' pectect my rights!"

"Which makes it unanimous," said Elbows, jostling the rising Irish as he got to his feet. "I wouldn't 'a' thought of that, Carp: you got a real head on you."

Nevada led his horse around the buildings, while his companions strolled through the kitchen, despite the cook's garbled protests; and they met again in the main room, where a pile of clothing soon grew on the edge of a bunk. In a few minutes, Tex was ready for work, said so, and waited.

"Riley," said Nevada, "if you wasn't so set to go on with yore gamblin' tour, I'd give you a good, steady job. Gamblin's purty risky."

"Mebby that's why I like it," said Tex, giving an opening for what he thought was in Nevada's mind.

"An' professional gamblin' is frequent dangerous," said Nevada significantly. "Not that I'm sayin' that you'd cheat; but there might be some damn fool that thought you would. Get my drift?"

"I savvy it," answered Tex without animus. "However, that danger might be attractive to a man who didn't bungle his cheatin', an' who had a trained gun hand."

"I don't like that shoulder holster, just th' same," said Carp, dogmatically. "I'll say gamblin' is plumb risky."

Here was the opening that Tex had been waiting for, an opening repeated. Knowing that these men were cattle thieves, and not supposed to know it, he might do well to give them a hint that would help them along.

"Gamblin' risky?" he scoffed. "Hub! I know a lot of things that are a hull lot riskier than gamblin'—gamblin' with *cards*. Know 'em from personal experience. Rememberin' what you said, last night, about twenty years bein' a long time, an' also rememberin' somethin' about th' statue of limitations, I'm beginnin' to feel like gamblin' a little right now—with words. Anyhow, a young man does things that he shouldn't ought to do; an' I shore was a young man, once. I could tell you a lot of things that are riskier than gamblin', if I had a mind to. An' what's more, if I had my youth to live over ag'in, I'd live it just like I did." He laughed exultantly, and a little sarcastically. "Gamblin' risky? Hell!"

Nevada was looking at him closely from between half-closed lids, and a frown of concentration marked his forehead.

"Huh!" he said gently. "Riley, I'm aimin' to ask you a question. It's a right personal question, an' you shore don't have to answer it unless you want to. If you answer it with a *yes*, it won't do you no harm. An' I'm sayin', farther, that I ain't askin' it just out of idle curiosity; an' neither am I askin' it with any idear of injurin' you. Yo're free to leave us any time you want; but, of course, before you do leave us, I'll have a few words to say to you."

"What's th' question?" asked Tex, calmly; but he was not so calm inwardly. He was tensed to draw against the odds of four to one and to let the event abide the issue; but of this he gave no sign. Years of gambling and questionable living had given him remarkable con-

trol over the muscles of his face and the look in his eyes. Just now, the latter were blank and expressionless.

"I been thinkin' over yore story of last night," said Nevada evenly, "an' it struck me, more an' more, that you told it from th' side of a defender instead of an attacker. You rode her purty well, I'm admittin'; but yore hand touched th' pommel frequent, 'specially when you got all excited. Th' escape of Tom Wilkins was right real; too real for anybody to tell like that, except Tom Wilkins. An' you admitted that Tom wasn't killed, an' that he's still alive. Now comes th' question: Are you, or was you, Tom Wilkins?"

Four pairs of eyes were boring into his own as Tex looked from man to man. He saw tense interest, but no hostility. He hesitated, and looked at the floor: but the thighs of the four remained in his range of vision.

"What you askin' me that for?" he asked in a mumble. "I ain't Tom Wilkins."

"Look at me!" snapped Nevada, and Tex sullenly obeyed, and saw a glint in the cold eyes that reminded him of a snake. It was the same look that had made Johnny Nelson nervous. "*Are* you Tom Wilkins?"

"What you tryin' to do?" asked Tex, backing away a little. "What you mean?"

"Just that!" snapped Nevada, taking a short step forward. "*Are* you?"

Here Tex took his life in his hands in earnest. Four to one, they were; but for the sake of later security, for the sake of perfection in his acting, to banish suspicion, he gambled in a way that he did not need to gamble. Cringing a little to throw them off their guard, he sud-

denly dropped and raised his hands. Hopalong would have shouted aloud had he seen that double draw. The movement was scarcely a blurr, for the hands seemed to disappear and then reappear with a gun in each.

Admiration flashed across four faces, admiration and amazement. Nevada, with all his fame and prowess, had never made a swifter, better draw than that. The four saw an angry, contorted face, with just a trace of fear in it, and it was the fear which made the situation dangerous; there is no telling what thing a frightened man may do; and the high lights in the cold eyes bespoke a desperate determination.

"Wilkins," drawled Nevada, gently shaking his head whereupon Charley withdrew the muzzle of his rifle from the gallery door, "Wilkins, yo're a nat'ral born gambler; an' I'll admit that yo're fond of takin' risks. Now that you've got us cold, an' are safe: Are—you—Tom—Wilkins?"

"None of yore damn business!" snapped Tex, his two guns as steady as rocks. "Tex Riley is good enough for me, an' it's shore good enough for you."

"Mebby; we'll let it ride that way, for a while. Did you ever know Deacon Rankin or Slippery Trendley?"

"Yes," said Tex, truthfully. He had really known them both very well, and had mourned their passing, to a slight degree.

"Well, so did I," said Nevada, smiling. "Now, then, just for old time's sake, what did they look like? How did they talk?"

Tex backed a little farther away, weighing these

questions. It would do him no harm, even among honest men, to answer them. More than one honest man must have known both of those rustlers. He slowly answered, and he mentioned a little tricky characteristic or two belonging to the men in question. This carried conviction, which was increased when he mentioned a scar on Deacon Rankin's leg.

Nevada nodded occasionally while Tex spoke, and when the visitor had finished, he said something that was like a bombshell in its dangerous possibilities.

"You said, last night, that Charley Teale was in that fight, on Rankin's side, an' that he was killed. He was. I know that, because he was my father. Surprise you?"

Tex recovered his poker face and thought swiftly. Had Nevada ever seen Tom Wilkins? Was he artfully digging a trap for a victim that had thought himself to be secure? He was glad that he had his guns on the four. Then he drew a breath of relief, for he somehow was certain that none of the men in this gang ever had seen the real Tom Wilkins. If they had, they all could not have acted so superbly. Again he gambled.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, and slowly there broke across his face a questioning smile. "Charley Teale yore father! Why, damn it; then I must be among friends! Just what kind of an outfit is this, anyhow?"

"Just th' same kind of an outfit that went down fightin' near Cunningham Lakes," said Nevada. He laughed quietly, and nodded at the guns. "Put 'em down, Tom; you don't need 'em. Riley is a good enough name for us, for *all* of us; an' we're forgettin'



that Tom Wilkins is alive. Remember that, you fellers!" he snapped, wheeling to face his three friends.

"Don't go too fast; I'm not admittin' to th' name Tom Wilkins, even to you," said Tex, doggedly, the guns still levelled.

"All right, Riley," said Nevada, whose patience was beginning to ravel. "Let me tell you somethin'; Tom Wilkins is wanted for murder, *two* murders. I'm tellin' you this to give you warnin' that Tom Wilkins better play square with us. A murder charge never dies. Now, you listen to me: You aimed to ramble around, earnin' a livin' gamblin' with cards. I can offer you a better thing right here, workin' with us."

"At thirty to fifty dollars a month, with found," sneered Tex, still cautious, still wary of a trap to make him admit that he was Tom Wilkins. "Better livin' at *that* pay, workin' like hell in th' sun an' th' dust with a lot of fool cattle? What you reckon I am, anyhow?"

"I might reckon that you was th' most cautious man that I ever saw," replied Nevada, "when it comes to talkin'. I'm admittin' that yo're anythin' but cautious with yore guns, pullin' 'em on a man like me. I like th' first kind of caution; an' that's why I ain't cautious right now," he said chuckling at his contradiction. "What I'm offerin' you is this: Workin' with us on *shares* instead of *wages*. If you join up with us you take Towson's place and draw down his money. Th' way things are goin', an' have been goin', an' are goin' to keep on goin', you ain't got no idear how much money that means. Some of my boys aim to quit, purty soon, an' go outside to buy ranches of their own. Savvy

that? *Buy ranches of their own!* Good ranches, with good cattle! Takes money to do that, more than they would have if they worked for wages. That sound like thirty or fifty a month, with found?" he sneered.

The expression on Tex's face was slowly changing as he realized the big thing he had stumbled into, the big opportunity to make real money that had come to him. He looked intently at his companions and, slowly, almost unbelievably, nodded.

"I'm with you till she blows up," he said, lowering the guns as though he had forgotten that he had them levelled, as though they sank of their own weight. "There was a time when I could use a runnin' iron with any man on any range. I'm honin' to get in practice ag'in. I'm makin' no promises. I'll do my work an' run my risks with any man of you. If you give me Towson's place, I'll do his work, an' I'll take his share; but don't none of you get it into yore heads that I'll be any man's nigger. I'll take no oath or sign no paper; an' I ain't admittin' now that I was ever Tom Wilkins!"

"Don't blame you much," said Nevada, grinning knowingly, "not with two murders hangin' over him. Yore name's Tex—Tex Riley. That's good enough, seein' that nobody else in here is goin' by his own name. Now, I want to tell you somethin', an' you want to listen: I'm boss of this gang. Nobody else will give you any orders, except Gila, mebby, who's playin' at *segundo*; but when I give you one, you want to hop to it. It won't be nothin' that ain't in th' line of duty, or for th' good of th' whole gang."

"That's understood," replied Tex, grimly. "I never

was no servant; an' I'm admittin' that there's got to be a head to any crowd."

"Yes," said Nevada, his voice rising a little; "that's understood! If you don't play square, you won't live very long, either in th' buttes or out of 'em. I don't want no damn oaths. They're baby plays, an' made for lodge meetin's. This ain't no lodge, not by a damn sight. Now, there ain't no strings to you but yore own profits, an' what you shore as hell will get if you play false. Get a good cayuse from th' hoss corral an' take Towson's saddle with you.

"These boys are ridin' up th' valley, after dinner, to relieve some of th' others. Join 'em, if you want to go through with it; if you don't want to go through with it, peel off them clothes, put on yore own, an' head back to Ojos Verdes. Threats are baby plays, too: I don't have to tell you what'll happen if you open yore mouth about what you found in here; an' there are a couple of sheriffs that'll be glad to know where Tom Wilkins was last seen. So far as we are concerned, there was never no sheriff's posse got together that would face all them miles of crooked cañons an' natural ambushes with us layin' in wait for visitors."

Tex remembered those cañons and smiled reminiscently.

"Can't say I blame th' posse, neither," he said, picking up Towson's saddle. He was thinking that the little Bar 20 crowd riding up from the south was not a posse: it was a war party, riding on a trail of vengeance. His mission, also, was one of vengeance. He smiled a little. "I'll mebbby be a mite clumsy at first with a

straight iron, but when I get my hand in, there won't be no man in this crowd that can beat me with one."

He suddenly remembered that he had heard no one mention Nevada by name and, therefore, he must be ignorant of it.

"Much obliged, Teale."

"They call me Nevada," came the snapped reply, "which is good enough around here!"

"Plenty good enough, if what I've heard tell is true," said Tex, chuckling. "Shall I pick out that cayuse now, or wait till after dinner?"

"Wait, of course," answered Nevada, wheeling. In the door he paused and glanced back. "Lay out yore stuff an' pick out what you want to take up north with you," he ordered. "Carp, you fellers come along with me. I got a little job for you that'll hold you till grub time."

Carp grimaced and loafed through the door, turned, and, pushing his companions aside, looked back at the silent Tex and laughed.

"When you pick out th' stuff you figger on takin' up north with us," he called, "you can leave them packs of cards back here. Not that we're distrustful of 'em, Mr. Riley; but only bashful about meetin' strangers."

Tex laughed outright.

"All right, you Siwash! I don't need no private cards for you. Get out an' go to work!"

Alone, he sorted out the saddle bags and placed some of his things on the narrow shelf above the bunk. He took his shaving outfit and a few other things and wrapped them in his blankets. As he worked, he thought;

and as he thought, he exulted. Once more he was back in a life of crime, and he was happy in his voluntary degradation. He had made no promises of loyalty, sworn to no oaths; he would have done either or both had it been necessary. He had not admitted to the name of Tom Wilkins, and so far as the name Tex Riley was concerned, every man in the gang was known by a name not his own. Everything had been placed on a live or die basis, and this suited him. He thought he knew who would do the dying; and every last man of them deserved to die for their murderous raids on a peaceful range. Shoot Johnny Nelson and steal his cattle, eh? Well, men are prone to make mistakes; and they had made theirs. After a few moments, he found himself whistling softly and cheerily. He checked the whistling and bent his mind on the problem of how he was to send up a big smoke column, one that could be seen for many miles. He knew where the material was, but how should he make use of it? To make that play twice would not be wise: but if he had to, then he had to; but he hoped there would be no need for a second blaze.



## CHAPTER XII

### A PROBLEM SOLVED

HAVING finished with his belongings and shaken the thin grass mattress in the bunk, Tex made up the bed and then strolled outside the house to lean against the wall and look northward up the valley. Men were riding back and forth in it, cutting out and driving certain cattle from the spread-out herd near a corral. Some of those cattle undoubtedly had belonged to Johnny Nelson, and Tex's eye glinted as he watched the manœuvring. In his heart was hatred for this outfit, but he dared not dwell on it, dared not let himself think of Johnny Nelson's injuries. If he did, he could not help showing a hint of his animosity, could not keep some trace of it from his words, looks, or actions. He must put it from him, must regard it as something dissociated from himself; he must be bland and friendly and unemotional, and this would place added strain upon his acting. Not for a moment must hostility be seen in him.

Outside of his own feelings, there was nothing very interesting in this scene, and he was about to wander around back of the buildings, where there was something extremely interesting, when he saw Charley leave the gallery with two buckets in his hands. The cook

was going after water and would be busy for a few minutes; and the thought sent another idea into his head. Carp and his friends were persistently eager to engage in a card duel with a man they knew to be a professional gambler: was this caused by egotism, or was there something real behind it? He remembered the mirth, the cock-sureness in their behaviour. It might be well to take a look at that deck of cards.

Charley smiled blandly as he caught sight of Tex, and smiled more as Tex began to slap his pockets in pretended search for tobacco. Tex drew out a package of papers to make the pretense sure fire, and slapped his pockets again. Something in an upper vest pocket made him pause and consider, and then he suddenly chuckled in his throat and wheeled to reënter the house as though to get the missing tobacco. Charley was shuffling along toward the spring, swinging the buckets carelessly.

Inside again, Tex hastened to the shelf where he had seen the deck lying. Visualizing its exact position he took it, opened the case and drew out the cards. They were brand new, which to a suspicious mind would give food for thought; but, of course, there was nothing definite in this. It might be that the outfit had not been given the opportunity to use them. One by one he removed the cards, laying them face down so that their sequence would not be changed. Coming to an ace, he looked at the back, slanting it in the light for lack of gloss. From the upper vest pocket, to save himself time more than from any actual need, he took out the little magnifying glass that he had forgotten up to to-day.

One glance through the lens was enough, and brought a smile to his face. An Ace, King, Queen, Jack, and Ten were examined and put back in their places. In a moment the case lay on the shelf exactly in the position he had found it. Now he knew why Carp and his friends were so insistent that he play cards with them. He had just had the pleasure of viewing some really artistic examples of shade work. He would have discovered the markings during play, but no harm had been done in acquiring this knowledge beforehand; and now he was as eager to play poker as his companions were. Without thinking, he closed the magnifying glass and was about to toss it through the window into the weeds behind the house, when another thought burst in his mind and made him slip it back into the pocket. He laughed softly and with genuine enjoyment rolled a cigarette and wandered outside again, lighting it as he stopped in front of the kitchen. The cook was resting halfway between the spring and the house, and the two men exchanged grins.

Tex sauntered around the corner to the grass plot and sat down to study it, the weeds around it, and the great crevice in the face of the cliff, a crevice well filled with vegetation dead and living. In the earlier part of the summer a meagre filtration of water must take place here, and then dry up as the season advanced and trick the growing things. The sage and the greasewood rose superior to the dearth of moisture, having private reservoirs in their generous roots; but the grasses and the weeds quickly died. Most of the cedars had died some years before, and here and there could be

found some which had died so recently that they had not lost their delicate foliage. Farther back in the crevice were a few surviving trees, their deeper greens standing out vividly against the lighter tones.

Here was a natural chimney three hundred feet high, a chimney open on one side, but choked with inflammables, and far enough from the cabins not to threaten them seriously. The dead vegetation would blaze explosively, almost like powder, and send a train of fire leaping up the wall; the sage and the greasewood contained moisture, and the latter had a natural varnish on its leaves, all of which would make smoke; but the heavier, darker smoke would come from the living, resinous cedars.

On the ground, running back from the cabins, was a thick growth of dead grass and weeds, baked by the heat of the sun until it was an eager tinder. A match dropped anywhere in the matted stems would set off a blaze that would leap like a living thing to the bottom of the crevice. Give it a minute's start and no man could stop it in time. Here by the houses the flame would flash up and out quickly and would not greatly endanger the structures. The materials were at hand and now it remained to plan the act, and to determine when it should be done. There were several things to weigh, and he gave them his consideration.

There was one patch of weeds which interested him particularly. They were in a hollow, screened by its thickly matted rim from the windows of the bunkhouse, gallery, and kitchen. He arose and walked around carelessly, and after a while wandered down into the

hollow, where he studied it at close range. There was a place in it where two boulders had rolled, and they had stopped within a foot or two of each other. Just now the sun was pouring down between them and shining on a mass of dried grass and weeds.

Tex glanced upward at the top of the cliff, estimating the hour at which the sun would shine down it and reach the little nest between the boulders. Having figured this out closely enough, he gave his attention to the westernmost of the two big rocks; and he believed that the sun would shine down between them from about half past ten and half past eleven, every day for the next few weeks. He glanced behind him and then slipped to the rim of the hollow and peered out between the stems of the weeds. Charley was singing a monotonous Chinese air in the kitchen, and no one else was in sight. Hurrying back to the boulders, Tex began to put his scheme into execution for a tryout.

Cutting a stem of sagebrush, he divided it into three pieces of nearly equal length and snipped off the leaves. Sharpening one end of each stick he notched the other ends and then bent down between the rocks. In a moment, he had parted the weeds and grass and pushed the sharp ends of the three stems into the ground, making them slant toward each other at the top like a tripod. Looking about, he saw an old tomato can a few feet away, and hurriedly procured it, bending and tearing through the bit of tin that still held the ragged top to the body of the can. Placing this between the upright stems at their lower end, he had a fireproof shield



to protect the grass beneath and to give security against any premature blaze.

Now he took out the magnifying glass, broke off the horn case, and placed the rim of the horn circle holding the lens in the notches of the upper ends of the sticks. Adjusting first one stick and then another, he finally found the proper position for the lens, a plane at right angles to the rays of the sun. It now remained to focus for the crossing of the deflected rays, and in a moment a white dot settled on the can cover, a point of burning light no larger than a pin head. Satisfied that the sticks would not shift, he put the glass back into his pocket and scaled the can cover into the weeds. A few bits of dried grass placed beneath the now harmless tripod brought the tinder up as high as the plane of the can cover, and he knew that for a few days, at least, he had an automatic fire lighter that would work without miss or attention on any bright, sunny day between the hours of half-past ten and half-past eleven, no matter how far away he might be.

One thing remained to be done to make this fire lighter effective, and that was to slip into the hollow and place the lens on its tripod, its rim held by the notches in the ends of the sticks, any time after the noon of one day and before ten o'clock in the morning of the next. An afternoon, night, and most of a morning could pass with the lens in place and cause no fire; but when the sun shone down between those two boulders a flame quickly and certainly would burst out and start a fire that would be roaring up the cliff before any one knew

that it had started. Piles of wood ashes in the hollow and around it told where Charley had thrown them; and the high weeds around the boulders effectively would screen the tripod and its damning lens from the sight of any careless puncher.

"Shoot Johnny an' steal his cows, will you?" muttered Tex savagely, as he retraced his steps and took care to lift up the trodden grass and weeds. "You pack of wolves'll find out what it means to raid an old Bar 20 man!"

He rambled back to the grass plot where he and his companions had loafed only an hour or two before, and reclined lazily at full length and passed the time in thought. Where was Hopalong at that moment? He must have reached Sandy Bend. There was a railroad running from there to Independence, and certainly Hopalong and his friends would use it. How long would it take them to get from Sandy Bend to the Snake Buttes? He believed that two weeks would give them plenty of time, and he became so interested in the problem that he lost track of the passing of the minutes and became oblivious of his surroundings. Two weeks from the time that Hopalong left Independence should see things shaping themselves for the payment of Johnny's debt and the recovery of his cattle.

Voices aroused him, and he rolled over in time to see Carp and his two friends turn the corner of the kitchen and move toward him. They were about to sit down beside him when the cook called them in to dinner.

"Is it noon already?" asked Tex in surprise.

"Shore is. Come on, Riley: we got a long ride ahead

of us," said Carp, wheeling in his tracks with the eagerness of a hungry man, and going back the way he had come.

"Goin' to run some brands," explained Elbows, crowding through the door ahead of him.

"Yeah," said Tex, without interest, following tardily. He was going up to run brands, to change SV marks into something else. Well, that was all right. In about two weeks he and Hopalong and the others would change a bunch of murdering cow thieves into something else. He was content with things as they were, and he dropped to his chair and grinned as he grabbed the platter from under Elbows's reaching hand.

## CHAPTER XIII

### IN HARNESS

DINNER was soon over, and a few minutes later the four men were riding down the slope of the bench on which the houses stood and were heading northward over a well-marked trail. Half a mile beyond the bottom of the slope and to the right of the trail three men were branding a Durham bull, and glad enough for the small, strong corral and the solid snubbing posts within it. Their hands were full of trouble and the air was full of dust and profanity.

Carp led his companions toward the corral to exchange gossip and banter with the hard-working three, and he grinned as he saw the flurry. Three men were sprinting for the corral wall, caring little how they got over it so long as it was soon enough. They dropped down outside the fence and wiped sweat from their faces as they slowly moved to meet the advancing riders.

Carp drew up, looked at the second corral, which he, Elbows, and Irish had helped to fill up that morning, and he chuckled.

"Too bad they ain't bulls, too," he said.

"Yeah," replied Gila, the foremost of the three.

"That little bunch in there all you've got left to do this afternoon?" asked Elbows, derisively.

"*That's* all; an' enough," said another of the bull

branders, feeling for tobacco and papers. "You fellers goin' up in Number Three?"

Carp nodded.

"There's a *real* herd, up there," he said, "but there ain't no bulls to be blotted. You fellers comin' up?"

"Don't know, yet," said Gila. "Mebby we can get a chance to go to Ojos Verdes for a whirl with Long Ben an' a night of dancin'. Tell Concho we'll mebbly have a head start on him an' his crowd."

"You fellers want to keep yore eyes on Long Ben," warned Elbows. "He ain't goin' to forget what happened to him in here."

"Which won't be nothin' to what'll happen to him in Ojos Verdes if he goes on th' prod," said the rearmost of the trio. "Somebody's goin' to get th' job of ridin' over th' drive trail, an' seein' how th' water an' grass is. There'll mebbly be some shovel jobs on them dams. Me an' Gila done it last time, an' we ain't aimin' to repeat till our turn comes 'round ag'in." He looked at Tex, and smiled. "Now, there's Riley. He's a new man an' shore ought to have his turn on *that* job."

"Well, I never fell in love with no shovels," admitted Tex seriously, "but I ain't too stuck up to wrastle with one. I take it that job ain't liked a hull lot."

"Nobody likes it a-tall," said Carp. "Long's you don't mind bull-doggin' a shovel, yo're shore elected to be one of th' *bombres* that gets th' job." He laughed. "There ain't a breath of air stirrin' in them cañons, an' they're hotter than hell."

"Well," said Tex, genially, "I ain't begun to worry about hell, *yet*."



"He's bankin' on that sermon he says he preached," chuckled Irish.

After a little more talk, they left the dust-stained three to go on with the branding, and rode on their way up the valley, where many cattle were grazing.

"Looks good, don't it?" asked Carp, turning to Tex.

"Good as any range I ever saw," answered Tex truthfully. His cattle man's mind appreciated this walled-in valley with its plentiful water and good grass, and the respectable number of cattle grazing over it. "How come Towson to leave a game like this?"

"Got killed," said Elbows.

"Then he was a fool," said Tex. "How'd he get killed?"

"Nelson shot him. It was a plumb lucky shot, but not lucky for Towson," replied Carp.

Tex grunted and looked around again.

This first valley was six or eight miles across at its widest point, and it was nearly a dozen miles long. In shape, it was oval, a gigantic dish, the encircling walls steep and forbidding and of no small height, although in contrast with the area of the valley they seemed but rims. Outcropping ledges of hard stone lay between the eroded clay and shale strata and presented bands of colour that were so level and distinct as to seem artificial. Cedars hung to the towering faces, twisted and distorted, their dark green a pleasing contrast. Some of them had died where they stood, and still clung tenaciously; while scores of dead trees lay sprawled on the detritus at the foot of the nearer cliffs. Along the bottom of the valley, wandering from side to side, ran

the little creek, fed from several isolated springs at the bases of the walls, but owing its real source to the spongy swamp in the south end of the valley. The line of its course and those of its feeders were marked with the green of cottonwoods and willows.

"Looks like we'll have to wait awhile for that game," said Carp regretfully, as he swung closer to Tex.

Tex nodded gravely.

"Be just as well if we do," he replied. "We'll have more time to get acquainted, an' th' losers will mebbly take their lickin' with a better grace." He chuckled. "I allus like to know which man to watch until he cools off."

Carp's answering guffaw rolled away into silence. He exchanged winks with his two friends, who had dropped back to ride side by side and make a group of it.

"We ain't got no cards out where we're goin'," said Elbows, laughing about something. "Don't happen to have a pack with you?"

"If I had, you fellers wouldn't play with 'em."

"Mebby not," said Carp, and then he, too, laughed. "Too bad you ain't got a lot of money, Tex," he jeered as his friends chuckled. "If we could just get a few of you gamblers in here, with lots of money on 'em, we could get rich a whole lot easier than we're doin' it now. I'd rather work sittin' ag'in a card table, any time, than drive cattle away from th' folks that own 'em."

"If th' gamblers knowed that you fellers was in here an' was so well fixed, you'd have one hell of a time keepin' out th' rush," said Tex. "They could ride in

with their stakes in their pockets, but they'd shore have to have sacks to tote out their winnin's."

Irish chuckled knowingly.

"Don't you start sewin' no bags ahead of time," he said. "You see, yo're mebbly figgerin' dead wrong. We don't aim to play with none of them decks you got in yore saddle bags. Mebbly th' seals ain't broke; but that ain't sayin' they never was broke."

"I seem to be th' only man here that ain't doin' no worryin' about what cards we use," countered Tex. "I reckon I can play just as well with yore deck as I can with any other. I cut my teeth on cards; an' no baby is scared of any kind of rattle." He laughed softly. "Don't you boys get th' idear that I'm scared of a straight deck." Then he changed the subject. "How far we got to ride before we go to work?"

"Near thirty miles," answered Irish. He pointed ahead. "You'll see th' connectin' cañon purty soon, between this an' th' next valley. We stop in th' third."

"Then we better move a little faster," suggested Tex, "if we figger on doin' any work to-day."

"We do all our fast movin' outside th' buttes," explained Carp, significantly. "In here we sorta take things easy, 'cept once in a while. There ain't enough work to keep us busy all th' time. We don't start to work till th' mornin'. Th' four we're goin' to relieve, so they can ride to town for a night of dancin' an' such frivolous things, ain't due to quit till mornin'."

"This valley is a wonderful range," said Tex, with genuine admiration.

"Wait till you see all of th' layout," boasted Elbows.

"There's half a dozen fine valleys in here." His eyes twinkled. "That wouldn't be quite so valuable to a ranch with only one brand; but when you got more than one, they're easy kept separate."

They rode on at a steady lope, came to, and entered the first connecting cañon, and found it to be a perpendicular rift in the plateau that seemed, from its narrowness, to be deeper than it really was. Its cool, dark walls, except for a few rods down from the tops, had never known a ray of direct sunlight. Through it whispered and gurgled the little stream, splashing under their horses' hoofs, its cool dampness very pleasing. Leaving this chasm, they entered another steep-walled valley as large as the first, but nearer a square in shape. There were more cattle on this range, considerable numbers of them; but they were insignificant in contrast with the size of the valley.

A cow moved grudgingly away from the trail and watched them as they passed, and the brand on its hip was plain to be seen and read.

"AAA," remarked Tex, reading it aloud. "Triple A: hum, *stamped* on, too. Be a hopeless job changin' that into anythin' innocent."

"An' a hopeless job changin' any brand within a couple hundred miles into *it*," said Carp, grinning again. "That's th' beauty of it, Riley; that, an' th' stampin'."

"I savvy," said Tex, admiringly. "Take them run brands, now, an' a handy man with a straight iron can do quite a lot with them. If they wobble a little, or bulge, or have careless ends, it can be blamed on innocent carelessness; but a stamped brand is just like an-

other from th' same iron, an' a feller can't monkey so free-an'-easy with it. Yore Triple A is a right small brand, too. You can make big brands outa little ones, but you can't make little ones outa big ones. Triple A cattle, I reckon, are th' natural increase."

"Natural increase," repeated Carp. "Once they're weaned, no man on earth can tell what brands they *oughta* be wearin'; an' not even a half-wit could accuse us of workin' any brand for a couple hundred miles into that Triple A. It just can't be done."

Tex was thinking that all Triple A cattle would have to be divided evenly among all the honest cow men who had lost their cattle; but he laughed admiringly.

"An' I thought gamblin' was a good business, even with a bunch of suckers like you fellers! Why, *you've* got th' best game in th' whole cow country."

"Suckers, hey!" exclaimed Carp, indignantly. "I can see where yo're gettin' all prodded up to run ag'in th' rope. All right, all right; th' harder you run th' better we'll like it. Don't say we didn't give you fair warnin'."

"An' you'll likely find that gamblin' ain't near as good a business as you thought," chuckled Elbows.

"Mebby," replied Tex. "I'll admit I've been warned fair, an' aplenty. Just th' same, don't you boys forget that I'm tellin' you I used to be a first-class gambler, makin' a right good livin' at cards, an' I took 'em on as they come." His voice purposely had grown boastful, and they could see that he thought very well of himself.

Carp turned his face away, lest his snicker and his expression together should tell too much. He had



implicit confidence in that deck on the bunkhouse shelf.

With another cañon behind them, they entered the third valley. It was only half as deep as the other two, which was deep enough for all herding purposes; and it sloped from the north instead of from the south. A cañon cutting in from the east took both little streams, after they had run together, and led them out of sight, their end and fate a mystery even to Nevada.

In the middle of this third valley, which was longer but narrower than the other two, a ridge of rock and clay ran up nearly a hundred feet above the plain on which it stood. A little stand of cedars topped it, most of the trees dead and contrasting vividly with the green sheen of the living, their dead browns shining in the sunlight. Near the edge of this timber was a rough log shack, and up to it ran a grayish yellow trail. At the base of the hill, two fires were dying and a herd of cattle was being drifted lazily to graze, spreading out slowly as they moved. Six men loafed along with them, while the seventh passed to and fro behind the open door of the cabin on the slope, taking his turn as cook. This person stopped abruptly in the door, stepped through it, and waved a hand. Down with the herd, man after man turned in his saddle to welcome the nearing relief.

"Fine-lookin' cattle," said Tex.

"Oughta be," said Carp, complacently. "There ain't no scrub bulls runnin' around them eastern ranges. Those fellers have got fine Durhams. An' *this* place ain't no tin-horn outfit; not by a damn sight it ain't. We got *good* cattle, an' lots of 'em."

"It's just our luck to get here when Concho Charley's doin' th' cookin'," growled Elbows, disgustedly.

"If he cooks any worse'n you do, I ain't found it out yet," said Irish. "An' that leads me on to state that he's a plumb rotten cook."

"Grouchin' about yore grub already, huh?" inquired Carp. "Trouble with you fellers is that th' Chink is too good a cook. You been spoiled. I can remember th' time when you'd eat anythin', any damn thing a-tall, an' ask for more."

"That's all right; but he could wash his hands, couldn't he?"

"Mebby he would if you'd tell him to," retorted Carp, sarcastically.

"I'm aimin' to tell him to, some day soon!" snapped Elbows, and there was that in his voice that carried conviction.

"I hope you don't tell him while I'm in that little cabin," said Carp. "Concho's got an awful sweet disposition, but I don't hanker to be shut up in no little cabin, playin' th' part of innocent onlooker, when it gets strained."

"Yeah, so's a mad rattler got a sweet disposition," said Irish, contemplatively. "Don't you get careless, Elbows, when you tell him that."

"An' I'm tellin' you, Elbows, *not* to tell him that," said Carp. "That old grudge may be dyin', but it's shore a long ways from bein' plumb dead an' buried. You keep yore mouth shut, an' eat what's put before you."

"Hell! I ain't goin' to dig up no hatchet," explained Elbows with great earnestness. "I ain't goin' to hurt

his feelin's," he insisted righteously. He seemed hurt that Carp should doubt his saintly intentions. "All I'm goin' to say is: 'Why don't you wash yore dirty paws before you start cookin'?' There ain't nothin' in *that* to put him on th' prod, *is there?*'"

"Not nothin' a-tall," sighed Carp. "No more than there is in pullin' a man's nose. You keep yore fool mouth shut. He's leavin' in th' mornin'."

"He can leave right now, far's *I* care," rejoined Elbows.

They rode up the slope, dismounted at the door of the cabin, stripped off their riding gear, and turned the horses loose for the wrangler to worry about.

Concho stuck his head out of the kitchen window, grinned at Carp and Irish, looked coldly at Elbows, and then let his gaze settle in frank and open curiosity on Tex's placid face.

"Another hungry pilgrim," he sighed. "You takin' Towson's place?"

"He is," said Carp. "Meet Tex Riley. Yes, this here is th' great Concho Charley you've read about so much. They didn't name th' river after him because they named him after th' river."

"Well, long's they didn't call me after no fish I ain't doin' no fault-findin'," drawled Concho.

"Mr. Concho, I want you-all to understand that I wasn't named after no fish," said Carp, grandly and haughtily.

"Carp bein' short for Carpenter," Irish explained to Tex. "You'll know why Elbows was named after you set next to him at a crowded table."

Elbows shifted his inquiring stare from Concho's very soiled hands to the herd down below.

"How many night shifts you fellers been runnin'?"

"Three," answered Concho. "I say a cook oughta be off night ridin', like a wrangler. They are in all th' outfits I was ever in before."

"Long's everybody takes their turn cookin', I reckon one way's as good as another," said Elbows, preferring to take Concho's joke seriously. Again he was gazing fixedly at the soiled hands, and again looked down at the herd when he found Carp's keen eyes on him.

"How many you got branded?" asked Irish to change the subject.

"Near half," answered the cook. "You boys got th' second an' third shifts to split up between you. Here comes th' first pair to feed. You might as well eat with them."

Two men had left the peaceful herd and were riding toward the ridge. They would eat their supper and go back again to take over the first and most pleasant of the shifts. They saw the wrangler riding among the horses feeding along a distant rill, cutting out the favourite night mounts and getting ready to drive them in and impound them in a flimsy rope corral.

The evening was settling down to a tranquil glory, and the long shadows of the western cliffs crept swiftly from their bases. Beautiful sun shafts slanted through every break in the high wall, shining like pale gold against the deepening mauves and lilacs of the shadows. A few minutes more and the pale yellow gold took on richer, warmer tones, hauntingly beautiful

against the purpling shadows. The eastern wall of the valley was undergoing a wonderful transformation of colours, for now the slanting sun shafts, kindlier in power and softer, deeper and richer in tone, were bathing each stratum colour until it glowed. Each tint and shade was lambent, and here and there the shadows of cracks and crevices and outthrust points made pools of violet to drive an artist mad with envy and impotency. Over all was a deepening sky, steadily growing bluer; and peace, peace ineffable, stole up with the silence which seemed to rise from the valley floor like a ghostly tide.



## CHAPTER XIV

### BRAND BLOTTING

TEX awakened with the smell of coffee and cooking food in his nostrils. Here and there men stirred in their bunks or felt sleepily for clothing. Breakfast was soon tackled and eaten silently and hurriedly, and the signs, which he well knew, discounted the remarks about the members of this band taking life easy in the buttes. It began to look to him as though there was plenty of work to be done and not much time to be spent in idling; and, judging purely from the surface indications, his conclusions were justified. It remained for later explanations to clear up the matter and set him right. Four men quickly rose from the table and hastened outside, to go down to the herd and relieve the last night shift. Concho, a cook no longer, was getting ready to go to Ojos Verdes with his three friends, and the kitchen noises now were as music to his ears. The simmering grudge between him and Elbows, the present cook, had been well handled by Carp and the others, and at no time had become serious.

A man stuck his head in at the door.

"Here comes Gila, ridin' like th' hammers of hell," he announced. "Wonder what's up, to make him ride

at night?" The speaker's eyes picked out the whistling Concho and the cheerful companions who were to join him on the short vacation. The four made a compact group and usually were found together. "I bet you fellers don't go to town to-day. Looks like Nevady mebbby wanted to ketch you before you got started."

Tex fervently hoped that nothing more serious than this was the explanation of Gila's ride. He was a little disturbed, as he had cause to be. Was it possible that Nevada had learned something of the truth, or suspected it? Tex slung his gun belts around him as though from force of habit, but he was moving swiftly; and he leaned with his back against the end wall, smiling at the looks on the faces of Concho and his friends. Another thought popped into his mind to bother him: Had Nevada learned from some friend around Sandy Bend that the old Bar 20 crowd was on their way to the buttes? He wished that Gila would ride faster, and get the matter settled, one way or another.

Carp wandered in to get a fresh sack of tobacco from his bunk, but really to be on hand in case Elbows started to make ill-timed remarks at the expense of Concho. A horse was walking up the hill, and in a few moments its rider leaped to the ground and clomped in through the doorway.

"Lo, boys," said Gila, smiling; and his gaze settled on Concho and the now anxious three. "You boys can put on yore soiled neckerchiefs. Yore visit to town is postponed. Nevady sent me down here to start cleanin' up things before anybody gets off. He wants th' valleys cleaned up before we get ready for th' drive.

He's right, too; th' way th' work has been pilin' up is shore scandalous."

"Is that so!" snapped Concho, surlily. "Who's fault is it that th' work's been pilin' up?"

"If we hadn't 'a' raided so cussed hard an' fast, th' work wouldn't 'a' piled up," growled a companion.

"Shore!" snapped another. "We shore got them outer valleys in a fine mess, dumpin' all them cattle into 'em, time after time. What does he expect?"

"You know why we crowded 'em, an' why we made so many raids!" retorted Gila. "You added yore say-so to makin' 'em, didn't you?"

"My say-so had a lot to do with 'em, didn't it?" sneered Concho.

"What's th' difference, anyhow?" inquired Carp, turning to the disgruntled four. "If you don't go to town now, you go later, don't you? You go before anybody else goes, don't you? This here ranch is all gummed up, an' we oughta get it straightened out as soon as we can. We can't drive till them brand sores heal up on that bunch down in Valley One; an', anyhow, there ain't enough cattle down there to make a good trail herd. What's th' difference?"

"Lots of difference! Here we been gettin' an edge on us for a whirl in town, workin' like a lot of dogs to bring it nearer; an' now we got to stay here like a bunch of kids. *That's* th' difference!"

Elbows's voice arose in song, a song of derision and elation, and a song rather ill-timed. Concho took a short step toward the kitchen, but found Gila in front of him; and Carp was at Gila's side, his eyes on Concho's friends.

"All right!" snapped Concho, shoving his face up close to Gila's. "We'll stay, but we'll pick our own jobs, if we do. We'll ride herd. We've done our share of brandin' an' cuttin' out an' draggin' an' holdin'. You savvy me, Gila? Until this herd is out of th' way, we're ridin' sign on it."

"I can hear you," said Gila. "I ain't deaf. That's fair enough. I come down here with th' idear of takin' over yore iron. Carp will take th' second, an'," he said, smiling as he looked at Tex leaning lazily and nonchalantly against the wall, "Riley, there, will take th' third. Just for that little song," he continued, partly facing the kitchen door, "Elbows does th' cookin' till further notice."

Elbows appeared magically in the doorway, a frown on his face and anger in his eyes.

"What you mean, Gila?" he demanded, with his eyes on Concho.

Carp smiled genially at Riley and turned lazily to look at his indignant friend.

"Just what he said, you damn fool," said Carp, who was Elbows's best friend. "I felt like bustin' yore neck! Get back in there an' mind yore business!"

"Mind my own business?" yelled Elbows. "Good G——d, *wasn't* I?" He looked curiously at his friend, found him again turning to face Riley, and sullenly withdrew into the kitchen, muttering something about whose business it was if it wasn't his.

"That's what comes of sayin' you was so handy with a straight iron, Riley," Carp chuckled. "We're all honin' to see just how good you are."

Elbows, apparently unable to solve his puzzle without aid, stuck his head in the doorway again.

"Hey!" he cried. "Who says I'm goin' to cock until further notice? We take turns at this damn job, don't we?"

Gila turned wearily, and his voice was edged when he replied.

"We shore do take turns, Elbows. It's yore turn now. Th' turns are gettin' longer. I figger yore turn will run mebbby four, five days; an' if it lasts any longer than that, it will be yore own fault."

"I ain't cookin' no four, five days to once!" retorted Elbows.

"Lookit all th' time you'll have to wash yore paws," sneered Concho, balancing himself.

"That so?" snapped Elbows, throwing himself on the balls of his feet.

"Shut up, Elbows!" ordered Carp, stepping in front of the angry man.

"Shut up, Concho!" roared Gila, stepping in front of the poised battler. "As long as you've picked out yore job, saddle up an' get at it. All four of you get at it, an' *pronto*."

"He's been makin' too damn many smart-Aleck remarks!" snapped Concho. "Get outa th' way, an' give him a chanct to back 'em up!"

"I'm tellin' you to saddle up," said Gila, calmly and coldly. "When this here job is over, an' Nevada is willin', you can grab yore guns an' go at it."

"You know Nevady won't be willin'!" barked Elbows.



"An' you know that yo're damn glad he won't!" called Concho.

"An'," continued Gila, ignoring the calls to battle, "if he don't let you shoot it out, you can allus hang up yore guns an' settle it rough-an'-tumble." He pushed Concho toward the door. "Just now, you both got other jobs on hand."

"Rough an' tumble never settled nothin', not with no coyote like him!" retorted Concho. "When I settle a thing, I settle it for good!"

"You can't even settle th' coffee!" jeered Elbows, trying to edge to one side; but Carp edged with him and kept in his way. "An' I'm remarkin' that any rough-an'-tumble that *I* get mixed into shore does *settle* things!"

Gila drove Concho outside while Carp herded Elbows back into the kitchen, and then placed himself at the one window until the other belligerent had started down the hill. When he emerged from the kitchen, he looked at Gila and shook his head.

Gila shook his own head in reply, and frowned.

"It's bound to come," he said. "There ain't no use of tryin' to stop it, permanent. Soon as we get th' work cleaned up, we might just as well let 'em take their guns an' have it out. If it's done that way, it'll be done on th' square. Damn it all, they're *both* good fellers! I'd give a month's pay to have 'em make up."

Carp was watching Hammond, Layton, and White, Concho's three friends.

"Yes, they'll have to shoot it out," he said. "Elbows

will kill him in an even break; an' *I'll* be on hand to see that nobody cuts in from th' side."

"An' *I'll* be on hand to see th' same thing," said Gila, looking pointedly at Carp. "If it comes, it's *shore* goin' to be an even break."

"Shucks," said Tex, pushing away from the wall. "Rough-an'-tumble has cured many a grudge." He raised his voice. "Come on, Carp; let's go down an' get busy. I want to get my hand in, once more."

"An' *busy* shore is th' right name," said Carp, leaving the pugnacious cook to listen to his own growls.

Tex looked at Gila and laughed.

"This Siwash was tellin' me how easy we took things here in th' buttes," he said. "Was he jokin'?"

"No; he wasn't jokin'," answered Gila, leading the way outdoors. "This here present situation is a jam, piled up on to us because we was too busy doin' other things while th' time was ripe to do 'em. When we get it all straightened out we'll have all th' time we want for loafin' around. Soon's th' drive is over, there'll be plenty of time on our hands for startin' new grudges."

The branding fires were burning brightly, the irons in them and getting hot. The herd had been edged up as close to the fires as practicable, and the cutters were riding around flexing their rope arms and wrists. With the appearance of the three iron-men the cutters headed for the herd and soon were bringing victims to the torture.

All day long, the work went on at a creditable speed, considering the exactness necessary in this kind of branding. Here was no chute marking, no simple

stamping of the brands, not even the hasty and careless tracing of them with the cherry-red iron ends. Brands were already there, old brands, and this was the rub. Old marks had to be altered by the addition of new burns, and the points of junction of the old and the new must neatly coincide. The new marks had to be made by irons neither too hot nor too cold, by impress neither too light nor too heavy nor too long. The iron handlers took turns, relieving each other, for their part of the entire operation of working a herd was the most unpleasant.

The heat and the dust and the offensive odours and stinging smoke of burning hair and flesh were endured hour after hour, all day long; the cut-out animals had to be driven close to the fires, roped and thrown there, and held down securely while the iron-men changed the marks. The holders claimed that their own work was the meanest and the hardest, and, to be honest in the matter, perhaps it was.

Two branding irons were kept going by two men, the off man aiding in holding the thrown cattle. Steadily, the herd of unchanged marks grew less, while the numbers of sore and sullen cattle, roaming loose in the valley, increased. Night brought a welcomed cessation to the iron-men and handlers, and while the wrangler drove off the horse herd and the first night riders rode from their early supper to take charge of the remaining unmarked cattle, three tired men plodded wearily up the little slope and slumped down against the cabin wall to rest for a moment before washing up for supper. Two of the cutters-out were boasting about their

horses, as they had a right to boast. These animals, at present under discussion, were very sagacious and exceptionally well trained. They knew as much about the work as their riders knew, and enjoyed it far more.

"Th' same old argument," said Tex, sighing as he eased himself into a more comfortable position. He looked at Gila and tried to grin. "I feel sorta busted, all over. I'll be stiff as a board in th' mornin'."

"You shore made good on that talk of yourn, Riley," said Gila. "I looked close at a couple of yore marks. First class, they was."

Carp shifted slowly and rested a different part of his shoulder against the cabin wall.

"You shore can draw a round circle, Tex," he admitted enviously. "That's somethin' I could never do. Some brand-readin' expert will see my Circle Star, an' call it Egg Star, shore as hell."

"Sorta planet hatcher, huh?" chuckled Tex. "Embryo Star, you might say."

"Oh, th' star's all right," defended Carp, hastily. "It's th' circle that's a little embryo, as you said."

"Embryo meanin' cock-eyed, in plain language, I reckon?" asked Gila, scratching his head. "'Tain't Comanche, Spanish, or Choctaw; anyhow, it don't *sound* like it is."

"It's English," said Carp. "Must mean sorta crooked."

"My Gawd!" snorted a voice in the kitchen. "No wonder I burned th' supper! All this here learnin' bein' spilled that-a-way right under my winder." The speaker stuck his head out of that same window,

and strained his lungs and vocal cords. "Grub pile-e-e! Come an' get it, or I'll throw her away!"

He did not throw it away. No one threw any of it away, although Concho threatened to. Was it accident that he drew the worst burned food? He asked this question loudly, and Carp answered it.

"If you did it was yore own fault, Concho," said the peacemaker. "It was all heaped up on th' platters, an' you grabbed yore own holt for yoreself. Anyhow, I'd rather eat it burned than raw."

"Meanin'?" pointedly asked a man at the far end of the table, whose term in the kitchen was dreaded by all sensible persons. He had a great reputation for saving firewood.

"I know it sounds suspicious, Ben," said Carp, apologetically; "but I shore wasn't thinkin' of you a-tall when I spoke. Hope to die if I was."

Ben growled a little, became mollified, and reached for another helping.

"Just' the same, Carp," he said, argumentatively, "I'd rather eat my grub a little under cooked, than burned all to hell an' gone like this here. Chuck like this shore will knock a man's stummick all embryo."

Tex choked and had some trouble to get his throat cleared for fast freight, but shovelled industriously as soon as he could and made no comment.

The work went on through the second and third days and was pushed as hard as possible so that it would not run over into the fourth. Tex swore inwardly as these familiar brands were changed, these SV, Double X, and Triangle marks he had seen on the ranges around



Gunsight; and every changed mark made him more determined, if anything, to go through with his plays to the bitter end; and to make that end as bitter as possible. His companions were friendly enough; but every man of them was getting rich at the expense of Johnny Nelson and his friends; and every man of them had raided savagely over the eastern ranges and cleared their way with lead. Handling the irons himself gave Tex a chance to study the two Circle Star marks for future identification when the cattle were returned to their rightful owners.

When a Double X animal, one of Lin Sherwood's, came to him, he had to extend the inside strokes of each X until they met. This was done by an upper and lower line as straight as he could draw them, each pair of uppers and lowers joining at an angle, thus: . The added marks are shown dotted, to differentiate them; but on the hide they matched the original  markings as nearly as possible, and became this: . Then from the upper and lower ends of the outer strokes of the two X's,  horizontal lines connected each pair, so: . This, made as heavy as the original marks, became . Here was the star, six-pointed; and around  it ran the new circle mark, thus; . The Triangle brand was made into the same  six-pointed star by the addition of a reversed triangle, in this manner:  and became . The circle mark then made it , or  Circle Star. Some may have read it , Star in the Circle, but the gang gave it the shorter name.

On paper, as here described, there was no difference between the Circle Star from the Double X and that made from the Triangle; but on the hides of the cattle there was a difference. It was in size, although the difference was not great; but such as it was it would point out to both the Double X and the Triangle outfits which cattle belonged to each. When the Double X stamping iron was placed, cold, of course, on a changed Double X brand, it would fit the heart of that brand with exactness; but when placed over a Circle Star which had developed from a Triangle mark, the stamp would not coincide with more than two lines at once: one of the original lines and one of those which had been added. There would be no question arise as to ownership if the opportunity ever came to test the altered brands; and if the trail herd were held up for any length of time, that chance might come. Once let Hopalong and his friends get into the heart of the buttes and establish contact with Nevada and his crew, there would be no drive until the fighting was over; and if Hopalong and his friends won out in the fight, there never would be any drive westward. There were many cattle in this third valley, and if the remaining valleys contained as many, Tex would be pretty well assured that very few of the Gunsight animals had been driven from the buttes and lost to their real owners.

The altering of the SV cattle into 8W was simple. Johnny Nelson also had used a stamping iron, which kept the size of his brands the same; but he would not need to compare the stamps with the changed marks to pick out the animals which rightfully belonged to him,

if the opportunity ever came to him. No other brand had been changed into an 8W, so far as Tex knew; and, therefore, every animal so marked would revert, on his testimony, to the SV ranch.

The evening shadows were stretching far to the east when the last steer was let up and released. The fires were covered with sand and dust, the irons collected, and the weary men again plodded up the slope to the cabin. After washing for supper, they were seated outside the building with their backs resting against the wall and talking shop, when Tex turned and looked thoughtfully at Gila and Carp, who sat side by side on his right.

"Too bad them Star in th' Circles, or Circle Stars, as you call 'em, are two sizes," he remarked. "I tried, while I was workin' on 'em, to figger out a way to make 'em identical, but I reckon there ain't no way to do it, a-tall. I suppose you boys have thought it all out, long ago."

"Yeah, we have," replied Gila. "There ain't no way it can be done an' leave th' marks lookin' right. There's a couple more faults, too, Riley."

"Yeah, so I figgered," replied Tex, screwing his face into signs of concentration. "Th' heart of th' Circle Stars are made of true, straight lines; but th' additions ain't, no matter how careful a man is. That was what made me slow, at first. I tried to draw my lines just like th' original ones, so as to hide that part of th' operation."

"Know you did," said Carp. "You shore tried yore best to make our marks question proof. That's been

done another way, however. I was grinnin' at you, all th' time you was wrastlin' with th' job, because I knowed you'd have to give it up."

"Well, we could allus claim that we had th' second stampin' iron made by a different blacksmith, an' that he didn't have th' first one to copy from," said Tex, more to himself than to them. "That would explain th' different sizes of th' inside marks."

"You've hit it, Riley," said Gila with a chuckle. "We can claim that, an' we went plumb through with th' play, too. Th' blacksmith over in Ojos Verdes made a stampin' iron for us, from our drawin' made in his shop right under his nose, an' it was made by guess, of course."

This remark, Tex thought, was either a lie or a sop to his vanity, because his suggestion had been worthless. The Star in the Circle brand as shown on the cattle was not nor could not be made by a stamping iron, or two or three of them. By no amount of effort would the added lines be exactly the same on any two of the animals; and after fatigue had gripped the iron-men, or carelessness due to haste operated, this difference was certain to become greater on every brand changed. Tex took it as innocent flattery, due him after the two hard and conscientious days' work that he had put in; and he took it correctly. He knew beyond question that the buyer of Star in the Circle cattle knew that they had been stolen and that their brands had been changed. In every case, the very heart of the Circle Star brands had certain lines which were always the same, always identical; and in every case there were other lines which

showed variations. No honest and capable cattle buyer would fail to notice these points.

"Where are we workin' to-morrow, Gila?" asked Tex after a short pause in the conversation.

"Up in Number Four, with th' same brands. We had all steers to-day, cut out of Number Four to make up th' next trail herd. We'll be workin' a mixed herd to-morrow."

"Number Four is where we leave 'em after we run 'em into th' buttes," explained Carp. "When we raid up north we come back to Number Six, first, an' leave th' cattle there till we get th' time to work 'em over an' separate 'em."

Concho, who was sitting next to Tex on the other side, now joined in the conversation.

"We been doin' too much raidin' an' not enough brandin' an' trail drivin' west," he said. "We got too many head in these valleys, an' too cussed much work to get done all at once. We ain't made a trail drive since spring, but when we do make one, she'll shore be a whizzer."

Endorsement of this indisputable fact came from several sources.

"An' that's th' best way, ain't it?" asked Tex, argumentatively. "Far's I'm concerned, I'd a lot rather get a whackin' big herd together, an' a bigger trail crew, an' make one drive an' have it all over with. What's th' use of makin' several little ones over th' same trail to th' same place?"

"That would be th' best way, if we could feed a big herd, any time, like it oughta be fed," said Concho.



"That's th' trouble with th' buttes; our grass along th' drive trail ain't plenty enough to take care of no big herd at once. We have to rest it."

"Well, of course, not knowin' or thinkin' about th' grass end of it," said Tex, "I was just talkin' sorta generally."

"Mebby it's good talk, an' mebby it's embryo," said Elbows, sticking his head out of the window; "but I got some talk that'll suit all of you better. GRUB PILE, you damn flat-heads; GRUB PILE!"

"An' it's shore time you said it!" shouted the first man to get on his feet. Being well down the line, he was not first through the door, but he did not complain. There was no risk of going hungry in being second or even eighth; and he was second by a nose.

## CHAPTER XV

### PROGRESS

**F**AR to the southeast of Snake Buttes lay Sandy Bend, an ugly little hamlet. The dawn of the same day that had seen Tex become a member of Nevada's gang had found a sleepy half dozen men opening tired eyes in Sandy Bend to face another wearying train ride.

They had their breakfasts and walked clumsily down a dusty street to board a dusty train, which started in a cloud of dust. The heated hours dragged interminably, the desolate and sandy plain reeled slowly, steadily backward to the monotonous clicking of steel wheels over poor rail joints. Long and weary waits on rusty side tracks, a dispiriting procession of squalid hamlets followed each other all day long. Lunch in a fly-cursed shack threatened even such appetites as these. With the dying shadows of a trying day came a greasy supper in another hot and fly-ridden shack, and then on again into the slowly growing night the train squeaked and clattered, shrieked and bumped and jolted, bravely doing its twenty miles an hour when the track permitted. Timid and smoking kerosene lamps, jerking and swinging in their gimbals, threw an ugly yellow light over faded red plush seats and cramped and sprawling,

dirty and unshaven humans, suffering grimly. Indians, Mexicans, and half-breeds climbed on and off; unwashed children cried, fretted, and shouted in several tongues.

Red Connors shifted again to rest one set of muscles at the expense of another. A day's work flanking calves would have punished him no more. He sighed, opened his eyes, and looked about him. Hopalong was trying out a new sleeping position, his knees against his chin, and a sudden lurch of the train made the contact violent.

"Asleep, Hoppy?" asked Red in a growl.

"Hell, no!" snapped the other, stirring viciously. "What you reckon I am? Only a dead man could sleep on this —— pitchin', buckin' railroad! I'd rather bust an outlaw cayuse, anyday!"

Red glanced over the car and sighed enviously. Pete Wilson, on the floor between two seats, his back to the side of the car, snored softly, sweat, grease, cinders, and dirt marking each wrinkle on his homely face.

"Pete shore wins first prize," muttered Red, and shifted again.

At last came dawn and more miles of depressing landscape. The jolting leagues and the dragging hours brought them to another squalid station and a poor breakfast. Here the empty water butt was filled from a well sunk in soil impregnated with gypsum, and the orderly functions of the body were now imperilled.

On again, the train took them to the west and north through the mounting heat, stopping for a badly cooked noonday meal. They were now in the land of the frying pan. The afternoon shadows were growing long when they came to Independence, even worse than

any town they yet had seen. It consisted of a station, which was a raised dirt platform and a shack, six saloons, one combination merchandise emporium and eating house, one wooden shack, a dozen small adobes, and a fenced-in well, also sunk in gypsum soil. There was plenty of land available for expansion, and from a distance it looked to be solid and permanent; and so it was, unless the wind blew. Just now, the wind was blowing, making a staggering line of cow-punchers swear with generous abandon as they made their more or less groping way toward the eating house, which loomed up gigantically if vaguely through the fog of sand and dust. This building was two stories high, measured from the ridgepole; plumbed from the eaves it was a short one story, but its false front gave no indication of this.

The last of the swearing line entered the store, slammed the door solidly, and dumped his sacked saddle carelessly. He dropped a heavy package of ammunition on a friend's feet, and carefully groomed eyelids and lashes to remove what loose sand and dust he could before looking around. The man next to him energetically dusted his clothes with his sombrero, and became lost to sight. Somewhere a hen cackled proudly and excitedly, making no secret of her achievement.

"Listen!" said Red, again hauling his saddle from under its fellows. "Quit that damn dustin', an' listen, will you? I hear aigs! *Fresh* aigs!" He looked at the storekeeper hopefully. "You got any ham, mister?"

Six men hung breathlessly on the answer.

"Yep—got aplenty," said the storekeeper. He looked to be one hundred and nineteen years old, but moved like a man of only one hundred and three. It took a discriminating eye to notice the difference. In these dry, dusty countries ages are deceiving. If the rest of his body had been developed in proportion to his Adam's apple he would have weighed two hundred pounds, without his socks. "Want fried onions with it?" The reply made him blink, and the Adam's apple resembled a channel buoy in stormy weather. "You-all figgerin' on to spend th' night?"

"That an' some money," said Hopalong. He looked around, and then remembered the height and squareness of the building's front. The bedrooms, of course, were in the second story. "I heard we could buy us some saddle cayuses hereabouts."

"Yep. Want to look at 'em now?"

"Want to look at some ham an' aigs now," interjected Lanky hastily.

"Without no fried onions," amended Skinny, leaning against a kerosense barrel. He bent down and sniffed. "Huh! Kerosene," he grunted in disappointment, and moved over to lean against something else.

"All right," said the proprietor. He faced the rear of the store and raised his voice. "Six ham an' aigs!" he shouted. "No onions."

"No onions?" came an incredulous voice as from a distance. The reply was a chorus, and sufficiently emphatic to be believed.

"Yo're a pore counter," accused Red, indignantly. "You never could tally no cattle for me."



"Ain't hankerin' to. Is there more of you comin'?"

"Don't have to be no more comin'; I count twelve," said Red.

"One, two, three, four—*bub!* I savvy yore drift," said the storekeeper. He raised his voice again. "Six ham an' aigs, double!"

"No onions!" yelled Billy.

The storekeeper looked back at his customers.

"Might as well tote yore stuff upstairs an' pick yore beds. How many cayuses you want?"

"Six saddle an' six pack," answered Hopalong.

"Pack horses, or pack mules?"

"Hosses," answered Hopalong. "We're goin' out to rope road-runners. You know right well mules ain't no good for that!"

"Hey?"

"Waffles said we could get good cayuses, out here," continued Hopalong.

"Waffles send you-all?" The old man cogitated. "H'm! That's different. You spoke jest in time, stranger. I'll send a boy to tell 'em."

"Mebby we spoke just in time," retorted Hopalong. "An' then mebby we didn't. We're right particular about cayuses."

"Trailin' for Waffles?"

"Goin' out to pick up a herd for th' T. & C. How soon will them cayuses get here? It'll take a few minutes to try 'em out, an' we're in a hurry."

"Hour, mebby. You buyin' that Three X herd?"

"I'll tell you when we come back this way. Yore cook ain't gone to sleep, has she?"

"By gosh! I better go see. You'll find th' wash bench outside by th' side door. Make yoreselves to home."

The storekeeper departed toward the kitchen, and when he returned he found that the wash bench was inside, by the side door, where the stinging sand and suffocating dust could not reach.

Red came down the steep steps leading from the upper floor, perspiration streaming down his face. In his arms were his blankets and a small, thin mattress which sounded like corn husks, imported corn husks, if one were to judge by the country roundabout.

"One little winder in each end," said Red, dropping his burden on his sacked saddle. "When th' wind quits I aim to sleep outdoors."

"Is it hot upstairs?" asked Pete innocently.

"Hot?" inquired Red politely. "With th' sun beatin' down on that sheet-iron roof all day, an' only two little winders?" He reflected a moment. "No, it ain't hot; not as hot, mebby, as a place I know; but you got to die to find it."

Skinny, having cleared his nostrils of dust and got them to working again, now discovered that the objects he leaned against were baled hides, and he went over to lean against the counter, taking with him some of the aroma peculiar to hides; and, as he stopped at the counter, Billy took one sniff at him and sidled off toward the vinegar barrel.

A loud noise sounded in the kitchen, its door opened wide, a dusty gust of wind blew through it, and the smell of frying ham turned all thoughts, simultaneously, to better things.

The meal was enjoyed to the last mouthful, despite the ambitious strength and fluidity of the bull-butter. After supper, the horses having arrived in their own contribution to the general dust, they were tried out and accepted, and placed in the best corral. The village fathers assembled, as usual, in front of the store, and all three of them borrowed chewing and smoking tobacco from the visiting strangers with an ease and grace which suggested they had been well practised. The wind died down slowly, and when darkness fell died altogether, thus saving six tough men from doing that very same thing. With a good sleep to fortify them, the dawn of the following day would find them eager to continue their travelling, thankful that they would have horses under them once more.

Shortly after sunrise, they climbed into their saddles and started off astride good horses, a mode of locomotion which suited them much better than the one they now had dispensed with.

They followed an old-established wagon road, locally known as the southern route, and which had seen a heavy migration more than a score of years before. It had been a thoroughfare for wagon traffic, trail herds, and travellers, and was as well known to frontiersmen as were the streets of their own towns.

The second day after leaving Independence, which was the same day that Tex and his companions had finished with the cattle in Valley Three, Hopalong forsook the southern road and struck along a faint trail leading over the semi-arid and rolling plains to the old northern route, which in earlier days had been an op-

tional road toward the Far West, and rather preferred in the dry season. Here once had rolled a heavy emigrant traffic, and the road was unmistakable, its ruts cut into the stubborn soil to endure for decades. Here the water holes were far apart and many of them evanescent, although they were better than those along the lower road; here the dried beds of storm-water creeks were deep and had steep banks, their waters concentrated into pools nestling under shielding limestone walls and surrounded by matted greenery. The little bottoms of the bends were knee deep with browning grasses and somewhat shaded by the sagging limbs of stunted live-oaks.

The caravan was making from fifteen to thirty miles a day, each day's distance predetermined by the miles between the camp spots. Off on the northern horizon was a hazy thickening where a ridge of low, granite mountains baffled sight. These mountains extended from the northeast to the southwest, gradually nearing the road, which ran on to turn around their western end. At midday, they loomed up like a blanket of fog at that distance, distorted and made vague by the dancing, shimmering heat waves; and at times they wavered in the mirage like enormous soiled curtains gently billowing. In the morning light, they were distinct, sharply cut, rearing their jagged peaks against a deep blue sky which changed in depth of colour and clearness as the day advanced; and in the early morning, the mountains seemed to be almost within reach, which sometimes enticed the desert-ignorant to their death.

Onward plodded the pack train, its six riders gradu-

ally slumping into the easiest and laziest positions in their saddles, but often gazing critically at the distant range as though searching dispiritedly and pessimistically for some token. They were steadily climbing in altitude, although slowly; the sparsely covered grass plains of only a day or two before now were no more. Sage and stunted mesquite, greasewood and cacti, made an ugly covering on the gray soil of clay and pebbles, blotched by glaring white alkaline efflorescences of many sizes and patterns. Many of the hollows had curved and cracked scales of mud covered by a thin layer of saline scabs, deathbeds of rainy-season ponds and pools.

As the morning turned into midday, the diurnal changes emphasized themselves. The mounting heat gave to this barren and depressing landscape an undulating vagueness, a palpitant unreality, and turned it into a quivering and dancing haze. Colours tinted everything, and even the atmosphere, itself, was not immune from this. Delicate and warm tints suffused the plain and the horizon, while thin blue stretches lay in the distance at the foot of hills, in hollows, and on the more barren level tracts, imitating the appearance of water. Much has been said about mirage lakes fooling travellers, and of horrible tragedies of thirst because of this misplaced confidence. Perhaps, since all kinds of people travel; but these pale blue lakes which Hopalong and his friends saw about them would have fooled no one who retained his senses unimpaired. At first glance, they were lakes; but only at first glance, for the water was too thin and lacked conviction.



Red Connors sneered at one of the more prominent, wiped his eyelids free of alkali dust, and swore under his breath as his hand carelessly and thoughtlessly rested on the butt plate of his rifle, to forsake it instantly. The leather of his saddle, where the rays of the sun found it, was a most as hot. The heated air had a baking quality which seemed to drive inward through coat and woollen shirt. He squinted across the heat-cursed expanse, growled petulantly, and slumped back into his former lazy pose.

In the rear of the plodding pack animals, Lanky Smith and Skinny Thompson quarrelled monotonously, neither having energy enough to take much interest in the squabbling. Billy Williams glowered pessimistically at them, at the horses, and at the savage and desolate plain. Pete Wilson, looming up on his big horse, rode with closed eyes and bore his sufferings stoically.

Hopalong drew a scrawled map from his chaps' pocket and studied it intently, looking from it to the waving and unreal mountains and back again. He turned in his saddle and glanced at his miserable companion, who did not like deserts and who often was quite frank about it.

"Them two peaks are beginnin' to line up, Red," he said, a cheerful note in his voice. Anything which indicated that those two particular peaks were lining up was something to inspire a little cheerfulness.

"All right; what you tellin' me for?" demanded Red, stirring a little. "Let 'em! Let 'em line up an' be damned!"

"Ain't aimin' to try to stop 'em," replied Hopalong in

a low chuckle. "Yo're gettin' up yore grouch earlier than usual. We're just gettin' on to th' edge of th' desert, an' yo're touchy already. Old age makin' you cantankerous?"

"Mebby, but I ain't got so old that I'm figgerin' on settin' in th' shade of a house an' whittlin' toys," Red very pointedly retorted. He growled under his breath, and then opened his eyes and glared at his friend.

"Like a fool, I wasn't satisfied to let you set an' whittle," he complained; "but I had to stir you up, an' call you Gran'pa—an *now* look where th' hell you've brought me!"

"Biggest mistake I ever made!" snapped Hopalong, glaring in return. "That's what a feller gets for totin' a tender lily around with him; 'though if anybody asked me what you was, I'd have to say a stinkweed, both by nature an' smell."

He drew out the scribbled map again and handed it to his companion.

"Take a look at this, Grouchy, an' see what you think."

"I told you what I think!" rejoined Red; but he took the map and examined it, glanced at the changing range, and handed the paper back again.

"Huh!" he said, frowning. "Accordin' to what *you* said that old Winchester feller told *you*, if *you* told *me* right, then we *ought* to be gettin' purty close to them S-shaped bottoms. That was where we was supposed to turn north, over th' hills, an' I'll bet them hills are hotter even than this cussed fryin' pan."

"I shore hope so!" rejoined Hopalong. "I hope

they're so damn hot that they set fire to yore clothes!" He studied the distant range again for a moment, turned his head to look back over the plodding caravan, and then faced about again, to ride grimly and silently on.

"Nobody but a lizard or a horned toad," said Red significantly to his bosom friend, "would get any pleasure outa ridin' on deserts; but *you*—hell, you ain't got sense enough to know it."

Mid-afternoon found the pack train winding down a steep break in the perpendicular bank of a dried water course, a storm water stream of some pretensions, but of a short and turbid life. Its high, clay banks showed a foundation of limestone, the ledge slanting upward; and under this ledge the furious, though short-lived, torrents had worn a deep and extensive pool. Sheltered from the sun, this water made a reliable reservoir, never dry during any hot summer if the rains of the wet season had not failed. North and south of it extended a long bottom, curving like a careless S, where the force of oblique currents had widened the bed of the stream until a hundred yards separated the gray-white banks. Windrows of boulders bore mute testimony to the force of those occasional torrents. In the middle, nearer the west bank, three water-worn limestone needles arose straight up from an outcropping ledge, worn smooth by water, winds, and sands.

Saddles were removed and the packs piled orderly on the top of the high bank, where they would be safe through the night in case of a cloud burst higher up on the watershed. Only tenderfeet camp in the beds of such streams on the high plateaus, tenderfeet and careless

people who should know better. Two riding horses were picketed in the deepest of the grass, and the others were turned out to drink, roll, and feed, and the little camp was made. Pale blue smoke from a fire of dried wood climbed timidly into the heated air, and soon the appetizing odour of cooking food took some of the curse out of the day's experiences. Twilight ushered in its change of tints and deepened the blue of the sky; the molten colouring of the distant peaks faded like fluid iron cooling, and the fiery mists along their bases turned slowly into the reflected blues of the sky; and when darkness fell, there blazed in the heavens myriads of stars which seemed just beyond reach.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE ODDS LESSEN

UP IN the buttes on the Triple A, to give it the designation accorded it by the members of its thieving outfit, the next few days were busy ones. Valley Four was cleaned up, its grown cattle re-branded, and a small herd of selected animals driven south under a few men and left in the valley below. Valleys Five and Six contained nothing but cattle from the north ranges, of several brands; but among these brands there were three which received special attention. They were the IA, C Diamond, and the 8N; and they became, by careful additions, Circle Star, Circle Star, and 8W. Coincidence in the original brands had made the marks of the outlying ranges peculiarly adaptable to alteration.

Four men now handled irons, to expedite the work, and Tex drove himself and set a pace which some of his fellow workers found hard to maintain. He worked as carefully as before in his blotting. The IA mark had the cross bar of the A extended a little on each side; the bottom was closed, and from the extended ends of the cross bar he ran converging lines down and made a reversed triangle of them. The I became an arc of the circle which now enclosed the changed A;



and when it was finished, another Circle Star was added to the rustlers' herds.

The C Diamond was as easily changed into the same brand. The two upper sides of the diamond were prolonged downward, the two lower sides extended upward, the ends of each pair were connected by horizontal cross lines, and the gap in the C was closed. By one upward, slanting stroke the 8N became 8W.

The two men remaining in Valley One had by now joined the working crew, and with thirteen men going at top speed, the work went on rapidly. In all cases, the calves were ignored. They could be branded at leisure, since, in the buttes, weaning made no difference in determining ownership: they all would become Triple A. The main thing was to pick out and rebrand cattle for the drive herd and to get them ready for a trip on the trail before the water holes yielded up too much of their remaining contents to the hot sun and the heated, dry air.

This selection having been made, and the drive trail cattle rounded up and cut out, the outfit drove them slowly southward from one valley to the next, picking up additional cattle in each. The brands would take time to heal, to lose their appearance of freshness; some of them contained worms; scouts would have to ride over the trail and report on the grass and water along it. From what Tex had heard in the discussions among his companions, he believed that two weeks, if not three, would pass before the drive was started.

Then came the day when the work was finished, and with its cessation, Gila had sent two men south ahead

of the slowly moving herd to report to Nevada for duty in riding over the drive trail and learning its condition. The remaining eleven men, driving steadily and at a fair pace, pushed the growing herd southward; and when it finally reached Valley One, which was set aside for trail herd animals, it contained nearly fifteen hundred head.

Such a herd of stolen cattle surprised Tex, and let him graphically understand what a menace this gang of thieves was to honest ranchers outside the buttes. They had been operating for several years, and their own herd of Triple A animals in Valley Two was a large one; when the unbranded young cattle of the other valleys had been marked and thrown into Valley Two, the size of that herd would swell greatly. Durham bulls were in all the valleys, and the better cows were kept off the drive trail. It was no wonder that Nevada had talked so easily about the big money to be made here, of good ranches purchased by his men. Nevada, in a few more years, would become one of the biggest cattle barons for hundreds of miles around; and his herd of improved Triple A's would be a rare sight for any enthusiastic cattleman.

Tex seethed inwardly, but maintained a calm demeanour. There was not a man in the outfit he would hesitate to kill. Visions of those deadly and unexpected raids north and east; of honest punchers dead or wounded because they dared to try to protect their cattle; the swaggering bragging of the members of this gang of murderers; the keen relish with which they recounted their victims of ambush and stalking; Nevada's cool calculation, and the limitless ambition of himself

and some of his men: all this made a total which removed every vestige of consideration from Tex's heart and fanned the fires of killing so brightly burning there.

There were thirteen men in this gang of thieves and assassins. In that little band riding toward the buttes there were but six. Six honest, loyal friends riding against odds of more than two to one because a friend of theirs had been injured. Six men riding against unknown odds for the friendship in their hearts and for the pride of their calling.

Tex had to hold down the proud surge of elation which came with thoughts of Hopalong, Red, Lanky, Skinny, Billy, and Pete. What a six they were! How well he knew them, and how much he loved them! How they had ridden and fought and worked together all through the years, thinking little of self when a friend stood in danger; how they had tamed a savage southern range, and then hastened eagerly north to tame a dangerous northern range; how they all hated with unswerving instinct such a breed as was here assembled in the buttes! How they hated all dishonesty! In his mind's eye he could see them moving steadily toward the battleground, grudging each necessary short march. He could see Hopalong, their leader and their canny, grave counselor, heading the little train; Hopalong, guarded by the gods who loved brave and honest men; Hopalong, the unspoiled survivor of so many desperate situations. He was as calm, as kindly, as humble among his friends as though he had not done deeds which inflate the egotism of lesser men. More than two to one, these old friends would face, and in the enemy's own country,

The thought made Tex glance about him, and his gaze rested for a moment on a man who had shown veiled hostility. For some reason, whenever Layton looked at Tex there had been a scowl on his face. Thirteen to six; it might be well to whittle the figures a little, to pare down the odds before his friends arrived.

The herd flowed through the last cañon and spread out in Valley One, there to graze undisturbed until time for the drive. Gila and Carp dismounted to build up the fence of cedars across the cañon's narrowest part, a task made easy and swift by the construction of the removable barrier.

Tex drew up among the noisy and strung-out riders to turn back and lend a hand with the fence, the others racing for the distant bunkhouse. As he wheeled, he glanced behind him at the yelling, excited string of riders and turned in his saddle to watch a grim tragedy moving swiftly right under his eyes.

Concho Charley was last in the race and had swept past Tex when the latter stopped. Half a dozen lengths ahead of Concho rode Elbows, whom the majority believed was Concho's master in an even break with Colts; and such an even break was slated to be staged at the bunkhouse.

Concho drew his Colt and put spurs to his horse, which sped forward and cut down the gap. Gun raised, he called in a low voice to the rider ahead, who turned in his saddle to shout derisively at this futile trick of racing. Elbows's face paled as he read his fate in that one brief glance, and his hand dropped in desperate speed to his gun. He had no chance. The crack of

Concho's shot sent Tex around in his saddle again, to face the rear before he turned back to become a belated witness to what might follow. Concho was looking back at him as Tex faced around again, and the murderer breathed with relief. Back at the fence, Gila and Carp hurriedly placed the last log in position and raced toward the scene of the shooting.

Concho calmly awaited them, serene in his confidence in the law of the even break. No one had seen the shooting, and the dead man could not speak. The position of the telltale wound would be found in his favour.

As Gila and Carp swept up, Tex spurred to join them, and the three reached Concho's side in a bunch. Carp rode on and dismounted at the huddled body, moved it a little, and stood up straight again. He came slowly back to the little group, his eyes on Concho's calm and defiant face, his suspicions persisting. This latter despite the fact that Elbows had been struck squarely in the forehead.

"In th' front, plumb between th' eyes an' a little high," he said, and looking steadily at Concho Charley. Other riders were hurriedly coming up in the order of their turning, and among the first of these was one of Concho's closest friends. This man also looked down at the body, and then rode on again slowly, a scowl on his face, and keeping Carp in sight.

"How'd it happen, Concho?" demanded Carp coldly, as the curious group pressed close.

Concho looked around the little ring of faces, saw the scowling Layton watching the questioner, and smiled.



"I reckon he thought it was a good chance to make his play," he answered, slowly weighing his words. "We all was racin' for th' bunkhouse, an' bein' last in th' crowd, they all got off ahead of me. Elbows was about a dozen lengths ahead, an' you all know th' horse he rode. He looked back an' jeered me, callin' me a name I don't take from nobody. This was th' one time I overlooked it, temporary. I knowed that we'd have our showdown, an' th' name could wait, along with all th' rest of th' insults. So I jeered back at him, an' told him that if he was anythin' but a yaller-bellied dog, he'd pull down till I got up even with him. Offered to bet him my part of th' next trail herd money if he gave me an even start."

He looked around slowly, shook his head, and went on.

"I knowed he had th' best cayuse, an' that's what fooled me. When he told me all right, an' pulled down, I thought he meant it. He had th' best hoss, th' stakes were high, an' it looked like he had a shore thing. I never would have bet him, only that name he called me made me mad an' reckless. When he pulled down, he turned in th' saddle, like he wanted to see that I didn't play no tricks on him. That was how it looked to me, an' that riled me a little more. I just bent over in th' saddle an' socked in th' spurs; an' then, just by luck I saw his elbow move slowly down his other side. He didn't think I could see it, I reckon; but th' murderin' look on his coyote face would 'a' told me enough, anyhow. I just beat him to it, that's all; beat him to it just like he knowed I'd beat him any time we had an

even break. He knew we was goin' to have it out, an' he tried to play safe. That's how it happened, an' how I figger it out."

"Shore, that's right," spoke up Concho's friend. "I saw th' hull thing. I was lookin' back, wonderin' where Concho was, an' I saw it all. Elbows was goin' for his gun, sly-like. You done a good job, Concho; an' you shore had a narrer squeak!"

"I know I did," said Concho, wiping his forehead with a shirt sleeve. "That skunk was watchin' for his chance every day durin' th' last couple weeks."

"I was goin' to yell at you, an' warn you," said the friend; "but it was all over before I could say a word. That's th' way it was, fellers," he said, looking around the group.

"Yo're a smooth an' oily liar, Layton," said a quiet voice near him.

Magically a lane opened to reveal Tex sitting nonchalantly in his saddle, his face calm and expressionless. Layton whirled, his own face suffused, and dark red veins stood out on his forehead.

"Meanin'?" he snarled.

"That you are a smooth an' oily liar," replied Tex. "You didn't see nothin' of it a-tall."

Layton's gun hand was gripped by Gila and the *segundo* pushed between the two. Carp, his suspicions now burning with a clearer fire, still watched Concho ominously.

"What you mean, Riley?" asked Gila.

"I mean that Layton didn't look around until after he heard th' shot," answered Tex conversationally.

"I reckon I shouldn't 'a' said nothin', seein' that th' whole affair was none of my business; but Layton's smooth lie sorta prodded me. Made me think, somehow, that it might 'a' been talked over beforehand. Layton's just a plain liar."

Layton was shouting insults and reiterations of his truthfulness, while Concho was scowling darkly at the new member of the band, and backing up his friend. The arguments grew swiftly, everybody taking part in them.

"No crooked tin-horn gambler can call me a liar an' make it stick!" shouted Layton. "Why, he's just th' same as said that Concho murdered Elbows!"

"Now that you mention it, that's just what I mean," remarked Tex, still calm. He was smiling a little now, and tried to work his horse around so he could be in line with either Layton or Concho. Gila moved to offset this and was aided by Carp.

"*I saw it myself,*" said Tex. "If Layton says he saw what he said he did, then he's either cross-eyed, or th' liar that I called him. Seein' that I saw him when he turned to look back, an' that he didn't start to turn till th' sound of th' shot was in his ears, I'm still maintainin' that he's a liar."

He tried to get Gila and Carp to move aside, but without avail, and he paid no attention to Layton's words.

"Layton callin' me a crooked, tin-horn gambler only makes another liar out of him. I may be a crooked gambler, when I have to be; but I'm no tin-horn." He chuckled over the conceit in this admission, but his

eyes did not leave those of Concho's friend. Carp, he knew, was watching Concho, and watching him hungrily. "I've called you a liar two, three times, Layton. Any time yo're ready, you can shoot it out in front of th' whole crowd. Bein' a stranger here, I'm askin' for witnesses in anythin' like that."

"Yore own quarrel can wait," growled Gila, not unpleasantly. "You say you saw th' whole thing. Then tell us about it."

"I don't hardly want to make a liar outa th' second man till after I've got rid of th' first," objected Tex. "You reckon I want two skunks crawlin' around after me, lookin' for a chance to pot me from behind, like Concho potted Elbows? You must reckon I'm plumb loco, Gila."

Carp turned his angry face for one instant toward the speaker, and his words were clipped and tense.

"You go right ahead, Riley, an' spit it out, *all* of it!" he urged. "Elbows was my friend, an' I want to hear th' straight of it! If either of these two skunks try any crawlin' after you. they'll find *me* crawlin' after *them*! There ain't a man here that believes Elbows had an even break, let alone th' best of it. He never got his gun outa its sheath!"

Other voices arose, urging the new man to tell his version, and the new man slowly complied. At the end of the recital, a recital constantly interrupted by Concho and Layton, Carp backed his rebellious horse free of the crowd, which spread swiftly to one side of the threatened line of fire. Gila dared not shift to protect

Concho, for Tex was coolly waiting to exchange shots with Layton, and Tex now told him so.

“Concho, yo’re a lyin’, murderin’ —— ——!” snapped the alert and angry Carp. “You know that you never had a chance with Elbows in an even break, an’ you knew that an even break was comin’. You shot him down like a dog! You hear what I’m callin’ you? Have I got to smack yore face?” He now was riding slowly forward, straight for the furious killer, and his intentions were plain to be read. “You pull yore gun, damn quick, or I’ll shoot you down where you set!”

“Shore!” snarled Concho, his face livid with fear and rage. “It’s a fixed deck! That lyin’ card-sharp gave you th’ excuse you been waitin’ for! Layton told you th’ truth, if you want to know it! Think I’m goin’ to pull a gun in *this* gang, and be mur——” His words had been coming slower and slower, and as he indicated that he would not attempt to pull a gun, he pulled it; his words had said one thing, but his eyes had said another. The two reports were almost as one, and as Concho fell, Carp whirled in the saddle and glared at Layton.

A shout stopped the proceedings, and matters remained in high tension until Nevada pulled up in a cloud of dust and barked sharp orders. The obedience he received spoke well for his leadership. Carp slowly let his hand fall to his side, Layton moved forward toward the crowd while Tex kept watch of him, and Gila turned to face the angry chief.

“Next man reachin’ for a gun settles with me, here an’



now!" snapped Nevada, the look of the killer flaring up in his eyes. "What happened here, Carp?"

"I just killed Concho in an even break. He murdered Elbows," answered Carp, unabashed. His gaze was level and direct as he stared into the angry eyes that flickered with the pale lights of death.

Nevada turned to Gila, his second in command.

"What about all this, Gila?"

Gila told him calmly and simply, leaving out nothing, the crowd nodding in endorsement.

"Layton!" called Nevada at the conclusion of Gila's narrative. "You speak yore piece, an' tell th' truth. What happened?"

Layton repeated the story as he had told it before, his scowling face turned toward the smiling and watchful Tex. Nevada waved him back and ordered the new man to move forward.

"What did *you* see, Riley?" he demanded.

Tex told him without stressing an accent, a cynical smile on his cold face. Then he nodded toward Layton.

"Layton's a liar, Nevada," he said.

Layton moved out from the crowd, his face contorted.

"That lyin' card sharp has gone too far!" he shouted, and then looked into Nevada's gun.

"When I want to hear any more from you, I'll tell you!" snapped the chief. "Anybody else see anythin'?"

A red-haired, bow-legged puncher pushed out of the crowd, looking at Layton.

"I don't know what happened between Concho an'

Elbows," he stated, his hand resting on his gun; "but I do happen to know that Layton did not look around before I did; an' I didn't look around till I heard th' shot. I was ridin' just behind Layton on th' right, tryin' to get some speed outa this saw-horse so I could pass him. When that shot sounded he pulled up so quick I near run into him. That's all *I* seen."

"You saw enough to make a liar outa Layton," said Nevada, and again turned toward Carp. "Everybody says you beat Concho in an even break. Looks like a plain case of him murderin' Elbows. Where was Elbows shot?"

"Right plumb through th' forehead!" cried Layton, pushing forward again. "Th' bullet went right in th' front! *That* don't look like he was murdered, does it, him facin' Concho that way?"

"How about that, Riley?"

"It's an old trick," drawled Tex, looking contemptuously at Layton. "Mebby Layton was countin' on usin' it ag'in me, seein' he ain't got nerve enough to draw when a man calls him a liar, three or four times."

"That'll do!" snapped Nevada, the lights in his eyes glinting again. "Stick to my question: how about it?"

"Concho had his gun raised," said Tex, "balanced for th' shot, when he called out to Elbows. Elbows turned half around in his saddle an' looked back. Th' slug hit him as he looked. He never knew there was a fight on, an' he never had a chance."

Nevada nodded, and again faced Layton.

"I don't care what you tell th' rest of th' boys, Layton," he said, ominously; "but when *I* ask you somethin' you tell th' *truth*! There's been enough shootin' to-day. Take up Elbows an' Concho, an' carry 'em to th' houses. Layton, you an' Riley shake hands, an' bury yore hatchet."

"That ain't got nothin' to do with th' work on this ranch," said Tex, coldly. "I won't shake hands with that lyin' skunk for you, or for th' whole damn outfit. I ain't all swelled up, an' I ain't lookin' for no trouble; but that goes as it lays."

"You won't?" snapped Nevada, tensely.

"No more than you would," said Tex, calmly. "I'll go so far as to say that I won't pull no gun on him unless he reaches for his own first; an' if he reaches for his own, I'll shore protect myself. An' don't nobody get th' idea that I can't protect myself. Just give Layton an' me a little room an' I'll prove that here an' now."

Carp nodded knowingly. He had seen Riley draw against Nevada and three others, one of them being Carp, himself; and he had no doubt that Riley was well able to protect himself in an even break.

Nevada was studying the new man thoughtfully, and apparently reached a favourable conclusion. Riley's stand was proper in any man who thought anything of himself. He nodded, smiled thinly, waved his hand toward the bodies, looked around the circle of faces again, and urged his horse toward the houses, slowly followed by a line of men riding in pairs or threes as friendships dictated. Bringing up the rear came two

horses on lead ropes, for the last time carrying their late riders.

The odds against Hopalong and his friends had been reduced by two, and if Layton persisted in pretending to look for satisfaction, they might easily become still less.

## CHAPTER XVII

### TRAIL SIGNS

WHILE events were moving forward in the buttes, while its valleys were being cleared up and the trail cattle branded and collected for the first drive since spring, the little Bar 20 pack train pushed steadily onward.

Two days after leaving the S bend of the dried-up creek, the cavalcade wound up the sun-scorched side of the mountain range mentioned by old John Winchester and so prominently marked on the scrawled maps. Here basalt, obsidian, and lava quickly would have crippled unshod animals, and even the shod hoofs of the pack train were severely punished. Upward it plodded, occasionally pausing to rest, and at last reached the summit of the pass. The pack animals moved on as one, straight to a little patch of grass under a moist wall, where water glistened and formed in drops on the rock. The men rode forward, bunching up on the far side of the little flat, to gaze at the vast panorama spread before them.

As far as the eye could see stretched a vast and grotesque ocean of ridge after ridge of broken buttes, presenting all the delicate tints and shades of the lighter colours; a succession of mountainous billows, as though



caught and instantly solidified in their motion. As the gaze lifted to the middle distance there was noticed a change; the ridges were not continuous, did not have alternate dips and crests in a long line; but in their place were more isolated buttes, thrusting their rocky formation higher above the sloping skirts of detritus; and, beyond, hazy in the distance, were magnificent masses of still greater height.

Here was a veritable devil's playground, presenting a wealth of mimicry beyond description. To describe it with any attempt at satisfaction would be to court ridicule; even to paint it truthfully, were such a thing possible, would be to arouse derision. The colours alone were beyond an artist, since no artist can mix palpitating light and opalescent fire with his pigments; and if he could, before he could use them, the colours would have changed. Had erosion a spirit, a personality, it here had gone mad; it here had gone stark, raving, hopelessly mad, juggling form and colour until they appalled; and neither form nor colour was stable at a distance when viewed through the heated, fiery, trembling air.

According to the information which these men had obtained, they now were near their last pleasant camp spot, the last unfailing water; but, the season being early, they believed that the following water holes would not be entirely dry. Grass and water were not always as big a gamble on an unused trail, for there were no preceding trains to crop the grasses to their roots and to use up a scanty water supply. Over part of their route there had been a time when wagon trains

had lost half their animals because of the country having been stripped before them; now the grass was high and plentiful at every camp spot and the animals had kept their weight and strength.

After a few moments the group broke up and its individuals took their positions in the again moving train. Winding down the perilous pass where no wagon ever had rolled, it made its slow and laborious way to the foot of the mountain, where a trickle of water from the heights above filled several rocky basins before wandering off to die in the sands. Pine trees fringed the mountain-sides, with scrawny cedars above them; and around the pools the timber stood in a small, compact grove, mercifully spared by the rolling boulders.

It was only mid-afternoon, and there remained four hours of daylight; but the next grass and water lay twenty miles away, the animals had toiled for seven hours over a hard and rising trail, and had earned a rest. On the condition of these animals, the success of the expedition greatly depended, and Hopalong was too old and experienced a hand to fail to take advantage of every trick. Time did not press desperately, and in view of what lay before them, a full day could be spent here to good advantage. Haste is the error of the ignorant; the expedient of the wise. The packs steadily had lightened, each day's food consumed being a saving in weight. They had started with maximum loads and shorter drives, and they had not yet made use of the empty water casks which topped each load.

Hopalong picketed his saddle horse in the high grass

and returned to camp as Billy wandered back from the highest pool with filled water buckets. The rest of the animals were greedily grazing and slaking their thirst, too tired, hungry, and contented to wander far. Pete was unfastening the dried-out casks and piling them in a heap. Skinny and Lanky returned with their arms filled with firewood, while Red was unrolling the cooking utensils and looking around suspiciously for ants.

"We'll take th' casks an' put 'em to soak," said Hopalong, picking one up as he spoke. "Reckon we'll stay here all day to-morrow. Figger on cuttin' a lot of grass an' makin' shore th' casks swell tight. To look at them cayuses, a feller might not think they had come so far."

"Reckonin' on th' grass peterin' out?" asked Billy, reaching for tobacco sack and papers.

Hopalong took out an odorous corncob, removed the juicy stem, blew violently through it, and then prepared for a man's smoke.

"You know what driftin' sand means, Billy; I'd rather cut grass an' carry it than to wish I had. It ain't as though we was pilin' more weight on th' animals than they can tote. If we find th' goin' too soft an' tough we can cache some of th' stuff; an' that means losin' a lot of weight."

"Shucks! Our animals are in first-class shape," said Red, whose disposition was sweet, temporarily.

"That's one of th' reasons I been drivin' easy an' layin' over in th' best camps," replied Hopalong.

The casks were carried to the middle pool and taken

care of. The far-reaching shadow of the mountain crept farther away, and the heat grew steadily less. Lazy men sprawled about the camp, resting and dozing; contented horses cropped nosily and steadily, and the hulling tinkle of water formed an undertone of sound to the droning of insects. Everything was peaceful.

"Damn that pipe!" growled Red, laboriously arising from his grassy couch to move upwind and to drop again. "Don't you never smoke it at night around no herd! They'd get up an' run to hell an' gone."

"Huh!" snorted Hopalong, lazily. "You ought to get yoreself one of these here corncobs, Red: you don't know what smokin' is."

"I got too teeterin' a stummick," retorted Red, "although it ain't never been bothered by nothin' else. Every time I get a whiff of that I near get sick. Ain't *you* got no sense of smell left *a-tall?*"

Lanky snorted derisively, and drew out a brand-new mate to Hopalong's fumigator.

"No, Red; he ain't," he said. "Anyhow, it ain't th' pipe; it's th' age of th' damn thing. That was Cimar-ron's, first. Lord only knows how long *be* had it. When he gave it to Hoppy it must 'a' been purty rank. Now, a new pipe don't stink. There ain't nothin' sweeter than a broke-in corncob."

"Pipes ain't like cayuses, Lanky," said Skinny, maliciously. "Th' more you bust a pipe th' worst outlaw it becomes. Hoppy's is so damn rank an' strong that I ketch myself expectin' to see it just blow right **up** in th' air."

"All jokin' aside," said Hopalong, placidly, "I want you all to savvy that this is a sweet pipe."

Red grunted, and rolled over on his back, staring lazily into the cloudless sky. Gentle snores near by told where Billy temporarily had forgotten his pessimism. Once more peace descended and enfolded the camp.

After a day's rest at the base of the mountain, they set out again shortly after dawn on what was to be a dispiriting journey over the edges of the moving sand hills. They were able to avoid many of these, but the few they had to cross punished the animals, and it was night before they finished the weary twenty miles and suddenly came to the base of a great cliff of indurated clays and crumbling sand stones and shales which old John Winchester had so carefully described. All that day, the cliff had seemed to come no nearer; and then, all at once in the night, it stood before them. The water hole at its base was now gone, covered with many feet of sand; and not a sign of any growing thing was to be found on the plain. A few stunted cedars held precariously to the steep face of the cliff, and the four pilot marks in the shape of cedars spaced evenly in a group on the top of the great wall just could be made out against the sky. For the animals there was a full ration of grass, cut in the last camp; and a part ration of water, thanks to the kegs.

The next day's journey was one of fifteen miles, with unfailing water at the end of it; and this promise helped to take the unpleasantness out of the present



situation, a situation not so unpleasant to hardened travellers as long as the wind did not blow.

Another dawn saw them off again, fighting the loose and treacherous sand at every step, the animals sinking into it nearly to their knees, and floundering up one side of the sandy ridges to stumble down the other in endless succession. The sun beat down mercilessly, and while the still air increased the effect of the heat, they were thankful that not a breath was stirring. Let the wind rise and their predicament would be dangerous and unpleasant to the extreme. Again it was night before they stopped, and despite the punishing experiences of the never-to-be-forgotten day's journey, their spirits rose with a bound. Here was the cleft in the mountainous ridge old John Winchester had told them about, a cleft which collected and saved the surface drainage and had never been known to go dry. Grass was plentiful enough, and it was decided to spend another full day here. The sand belt was now behind them, and they would have only occasional patches and drifts from here on. Then it would cease, and be met with no more.

They were now getting into the enemy's country, and must be on the alert, not only for the enemy, but for signs of trails leading into the buttes. If cattle were driven out, they would emerge on the west side, for the south was hopeless, and both the north and east sides were cattle ranges with indignant and pugnacious cattle men watching for such activities.

On the following day and the next they pressed on, parallel with the buttes, all eyes searching for trails, no

matter how faint or old. The two-days' ride was fruitless, and the water hole they camped beside the second night was dry, its curled mud seeming to mock them. Digging brought them nothing but the fatigue of their labours, and the next day passed with neither water nor grass being found. The horses were in a bad way and the kegs were empty. They must find water on the third day or lose their animals.

At dawn of the third day, Hopalong called the men around him and ordered them into the buttes in different directions to search for a spring or pool. They entered in a body through the only cañon in sight, but separated as it broke into others. In three hours they straggled back to camp with their ill news, and in a few minutes more, the weary, dispirited, and tortured train pushed on again along the outer wall of buttes, Hopalong going on in advance.

It was nearly noon before he drew rein to study the ground about him. Near at hand there was nothing to engage his interest, but as he looked eastward across the level plain toward the buttes he thought he could see the faint traces of a one-time trail. Eastward, in line with it, was the entrance of a steep-sided cañon, and toward and into this he rode. Here he found unmistakable signs. Dried and shrunken cattle chips dotted the ground along the sloping detritus of the walls. It made no difference to him that they were old and very likely of the year before; he had found a trail, and where cattle had been driven, there was hope of finding water.

The jogging, stumbling pack train apathetically

watched Hopalong's approach, listened to his discoveries, and pushed on at a little better pace. Going on ahead again, he left them and pressed into the cañon, determining to keep going through it until he found water, for the situation now demanded that he risk all on one throw of the dice. Three miles after he entered the gorge he came to a man-made reservoir, quarter full of water. Letting his horse drink a little of it, he went back to carry the good news, and in another hour, the staggering animals reached it. Around it were several acres of grass.

After the first rush to drink, Hopalong took things in hand. The horses were soon turned loose to graze and to wander as they wished, and with no fear that they would wander far. Near the lower edge of the reservoir was an outthrust ledge of the cañon wall, a few feet above the level of the surrounding ground. Above this jutted another ledge, forming a high roof, and protecting the lower platform from rocks or shots from above.

"Billy," called Hopalong, turning from a moment's study of the surroundings, "take yore rifle an' go up th' cañon about half a mile. Hole up somewhere, where you can see without bein' seen. Stay there, with yore eyes wide open, till somebody relieves you. I'll pick out a better place for you to-morrow when I go to look around."

Billy stuffed his pockets with biscuits, took a good drink from the water bucket, slung his rifle under his arm, and departed briskly.

"Red," ordered Hopalong, "you climb up on top of th' mesa an' watch for smoke signals, while th' rest of

us pile th' packs up on that rock platform." He turned to the others. "We'll make a three-sided breastwork, an' pile rocks up in front of th' face of th' packs. Don't expect no fight, but if all of us have to go scoutin' except one man, he can fight a lot better if he ain't in th' open. I'm goin' down to look close around th' edges of th' pool, an' I'll be back in a few minutes."

He moved slowly along the top of the bank, through the sage and the weeds, studying the ground; and when he came to the natural slope of the basin, he followed a course which led him along above the high-water mark. The lower half of the slope was darker in colour than the upper portion, and unmarked with hoof prints. Its dried surface was a gradation of shades, from the lighter grays of the upper bands through a steadily darkening zone to the moist band at the water. On this half of the banks there was not a hoof mark, proof that the trail had not recently been used for a cattle drive; and the upper half of the banks, never submerged, gave assurance that no cattle had used the pond during the present year. Was this an abandoned trail? It was early in the season, perhaps; or perhaps circumstances had forced the rustlers to seek another outlet.

When the camp was in order, Hopalong took his Sharps and went up the cañon to find Billy and to pick out a sentry post well within sight of the camp. He found his friend ensconced on a ledge with a few rocks piled up in front of him, and Hopalong climbed up the wall and joined him. From this perch, the camp was in sight, and from it a waving hat, if it became necessary to signal, could plainly be seen.

"You picked a good place, Billy," said the older man as he lay down at the sentry's side. "You can't be seen from below, an' you can't be got at from above. We'll make th' pond our headquarters for a few days till we know more about this part of th' country. We've got good water an' grass; an' after what we've been through, that's shore somethin' to tie to."

"Don't look like this here cañon's been used for quite some time," said Billy. "It shore *was* used, or that reservoir would never 'a' been made. Somebody wanted a dead certain supply of water an' grass, an' they wanted lots of both. Looks like it was th' last good restin' spot until after they crossed that damn desert outside. I'd say it's a cattle trail; an' if it is a cattle trail, we'll shore find water an' grazin' every so often."

"It's a cattle trail, all right, Billy. There's quite a lot of chips scattered over th' bottom. They're last year's, from th' looks of 'em. I'm figgerin' on doin' some scoutin', an' findin' out a few things before we shift this camp. Looks good, Billy."

"Wonder where Tex is?" muttered Billy, shifting to rest part of his body. "Wonder if he's got in th' buttes yet?"

"We'll mebbby find that out, too, in a day or so," answered Hopalong. "These buttes must run close to a hundred miles north of here. If Tex has got into 'em, we'll cross his trail an' find that private sign he was to make. That's a one-man job. After we find that, we'll watch th' sky mighty close for smoke signals. I sorta envy Tex. He's takin' big chances, an' gettin' in



where he'll mebbby find it hard to get out. I should 'a' had his job, an' him mine: he's married, an' I ain't."

"He's a long-headed son-of-a-gun, an' I'm bettin' on him," chuckled Billy. "Wonder what Johnny's doin', an' if Waffles has reached him yet."

"Waffles is there by this time," assured Hopalong. "We don't have to worry about th' Kid no more, unless he gets ambitious an' goes huntin' for trouble in th' buttes."

"That's just what he'll do, too, shore as hell," said Billy. "That is, he will if married life ain't plumb spoiled him."

"It ain't spoiled him none a-tall," replied Hopalong, smiling.

"Well, married life come damn near spoilin' some that I can name," growled Billy.

Hopalong laughed and slid over the ledge, making his way carefully downward. Billy settled himself again, reëstimated the range between him and one certain rock in the cañon, and set his sight accordingly.

"You never can tell about these married fellers," he growled, and yielded to a chain of pessimistic thought. Time passed, twilight descended, and a crescent moon moved into sight through a gap in the upper cañon wall before sounds from below informed Billy that he was about to be relieved. He swore at the placid Pete, surrendered the post to him, borrowed a chew of tobacco, and climbed down into the gloom of the cañon, to make his way eagerly toward the faint glow of the distant camp fire.

Daylight found new operations on foot. Lanky,

mounted on a rejuvenated horse, with a generous supply of water and a little food fastened to his saddle, rode westward out of the cañon and then turned to the north to begin his ride in search of the trail of Tex Ewalt. Hopalong and Red, similarly mounted and supplied, pushed up the cañon on a scouting expedition, leaving Billy on the sentry ledge, Skinny behind the breastwork to guard the camp and horses, and Pete up on top of the mesa to watch for the smoke sign against the sky.

Lanky rode three hours, using his eyes continually in keen scrutiny of the plain and the face of the buttes. At the end of that period he came to a narrow trail and turned to follow it toward an opening in the distant buttes. He glanced occasionally at the prints of shod hoofs, which told him that the trail was not an abandoned one; but most of his scrutiny was directed at the sage brush along the right hand side of the path. Half a mile of this careful scrutiny brought its reward. A sage bush, standing close to the trail and somewhat alone, had been cut off with a knife, and the top had been carried away.

"Just like he said he would," grunted Lanky. "Yes, sir; he's beat us. Good old Tex!"

He rode steadily onward, now watching the left-hand side. A scant two hundred yards farther along, he found the missing top of the bush. Knowing that he had discovered what he had set out to find, he, nevertheless, continued to follow the trail for more proof. A mile farther on, he found another decapitated sage brush, its branching top mysteriously absent; and

another two hundred yards nearer the buttes, he found the top lying on the left-hand side of the trail. This was enough, and Lanky, nodding his satisfaction, wheeled and rode back toward the camp at a lope, careless either of buttes or plain. Tex was in the buttes, as he had boasted that he would be; and now all they had to do was to find him.

Lanky chuckled as he thought what a task this might prove to be, this locating of a mere and perhaps shifting speck in several hundreds of square miles of a devil's playground; and he caught himself scanning the eastern sky above the maze of buttes, already alert for the promised sign. Tex was in the hills: good old Tex.

Hopalong and Red passed under Billy's sentry ledge without catching a glimpse of him, and rode up the cañon.

"Billy's takin' his job plumb serious," grunted Red, chuckling at the sentry's caution in not even noticing his own friends.

"He's follerin' orders," replied Hopalong, shortly. Then he laughed gently. "I told him not to show himself. He ain't. Billy's mebbly a mite slow about things, but when you tell him to do somethin', he does it. Don't have to do no guessin' about Billy."

"I don't know just what we've got ahead of us before we get out of this cussed country," said Red, after a moment; "but it shore is fine to be ridin' together ag'in, with th' boys, on a war trail. Only wish Buck an' Johnny was here.

"You know, Hoppy, I reckoned them old times was over for good; never thought they'd ever come back

ag'in. It made me a little grouchy at times. I used to sneak off by myself an' sorta dream about th' old ranch, like it was before it busted up. Then, on that ride north over th' Old Western Trail, you got to talkin' about gettin' old, an' huntin' a seat in th' shade, an' whittlin' toys for th' kids. That sorta pinched. I knowed you wasn't old; but I also knowed what made you talk that way. It looks to me like this here job of ours is about th' best thing that could 'a' happened to us, *all* of us. Some of us may never come out of these damn buttes; but they won't be no worse off than if they was lazyin' around th' Double Y, dyin' of dry rot. Buck wasn't too o'd to come down here. If he didn't have that cussed ranch on his hands, an' them wimmin to look after, he'd be right here with his head up, snortin' fire ag'in. Did you see th' look in his eyes when he realized that he was out of this raid?"

"Yes, I did; an' it near made me snuffle, like a damn fool," admitted Hopalong. "Still, you saw how he got back in harness ag'in. Made me blink, it did. It was Buck, come to life ag'in; th' old Buck, that used to run th' Bar 20, an' whale hell out of anybody that needed whalin'. I been worried about him, th' last few years; real worried, sometimes. Buck was slip-pin', Red; slippin' right fast. Used me for a crutch, he did; an' he couldn't seem to think clear no more. I've often wished that he'd sell that ranch, take th' gang an' one big herd, an' trail off somewhere in a new country an' start out all over ag'in on a brand-new range. An' the' wilder th' range, th' better. It might add quite some years to his life, an' to ourn, too. Here's a fork:

I'm bettin' th' left-hand cañon will be th' one. Quit talkin' so damn foolish an' start usin' yore eyes."

"*Me* quit talkin' foolish?" demanded Red. "Holy maverick! Listen who's preachin'!"

The main cañon divided, and then divided again, splitting and re-splitting, in general form not much dissimilar to the branches of a tree. A traveller's choice of direction was limited, predetermined. He might make his selection of branches, and thus choose a general direction; but, once made, he could not change it without retracing his steps.

Hopalong and Red passed two of these branching cañons, following what appeared to be the main gorge. As they rode along it, the cañon had changed its form. Its walls had drawn together, restricting the bottom, which now had become flat and level, and it had no sloping banks to hold cattle chips above the surface of the rain-water torrents which poured through at certain times of the year.

Hopalong drew rein

"Our sign has disappeared," he said, looking searchingly about him. "We don't know if there ever was any chips in this cañon. There might 'a' been, or there might not 'a' been. Th' rain floods would carry 'em all off. Before we go on any farther we better prospect th' branch cañons a little ways an' see if we can find trace of any chips. Between water holes, they're all we've got to go on."

They turned, went back, and explored the other chasms for short distances. The bottoms of the branches were the same as that of the one they had left.



There were no benches, no sloping banks; but they chose the first which branched off, and determined to follow it as far as they could. Systematic elimination would save time in the long run. After several hours, they came to a place where the gorge widened, where the bottom sloped up into a little bench on one side, and where tufts of cured grass dotted the surface. There was no sign of drift against the sage and the greasewood and this told them that the storm waters did not rush over the little pasture; but there was no sign of cattle chips. This looked to be conclusive that this cañon had not been used for drives.

"No use goin' any farther," said Hopalong, slowly turning his horse. "It's too late to explore th' next cañon. We'll go back to camp an' start out ag'in tomorrow. We've got to keep a man up on top of th' mesa, on th' highest place we can find, to watch for th' smoke signal, as soon as we reckon that Tex has got in th' buttes."

As they rode back over the trail, both scrutinizing, from this opposite angle, the floor and sides of the cañon for signs they might have overlooked on their way in, Red put his thoughts into words.

"We know that th' cañon back at camp has been used for a drive trail. Seein' that it ain't been used this year, or since th' rains, a drive might come through it at any time. Our camp will be right in their way. We can't leave only two men there to stand off th' attack of a whole drive crew, an' that means that we can't let nobody help us in searchin' out these cañons."

Hopalong nodded.

"If they use it for a drive they'll see our sign down in th' main cañon, an' they'll know that there's strangers pokin' around in their buttes. That will be so whether we move camp or not. One of 'em will shore carry th' warnin' back."

"Still, I ain't so shore," said Red, thoughtfully. "Their own herd will trample out our signs before th' drivers get there."

"They'll have point men ahead," objected Hopalong.

"They don't need point men when they drive in a chute like one of these cañons," replied Red. "You figger they'll be afraid th' cattle will grow wings an' mebbby fly up th' walls? They can't get up no other way."

"They'll need point men to keep th' cattle from strayin' up th' side leads," retorted Hopalong. "An' there's another thing; they won't know that some of their water places ain't been washed out, an' if they've got any sense a-tall, they'll send a man ahead of th' herd to find that out. If they do that, he'll see our sign long before th' herd has any chance to blot it out, less he's as blind as you are."

"That so! All right, then. That means that if they find any one in our camp, they'll mebbby make a fight. We got to leave more than two of th' boys to face it. We don't care how many of them thieves see our sign, if none of 'em gets away to tell about it."

They passed under Billy's ledge without catching sight of him, and in a few minutes more they dismounted at the camp. Lanky strolled from the little bulwark of rocks and packs, grinning widely as he met them.

"Tex shore got here," he announced. "He's in th' buttes somewhere," he boasted, and then told them about what he had found.

"How long ago did he ride that trail?" asked Hopalong eagerly.

"Can't rightly say, but it was all of a week ago, I figger."

"How an' where did that trail run?" asked Hopalong, exchanging pleased grins with his friends.

"Straight east an' west a few hours north of here. It went into a cañon like this one."

"You shore it was made by Tex?" demanded Red, anxiously.

Lanky flared.

"You reckon I'm a blasted dumb-head like yoreself? I *said* Tex made it, didn't I? Can't you understand English, you carrot-headed wart?" With a snort of disgust Lanky turned to Hopalong. "I'd say it's all of twenty miles north, Hoppy." He paused to exchange glares with Red. "Little path, it was. Used reg'lar, but not often. Single-file trail without no wagon marks. I'd say it was a pack-train trail. Tex cut th' sage bush just like he wrote he would."

"That must come in from that town called Ojos Verdes," said Hopalong. He pulled out one of John Winchester's maps and studied it. "That's where it comes from. Trouble is, we don't know how much it turns, or in what direction, or how far it runs after it gets into th' buttes. We can't foller it to find out anythin', because we can't risk gettin' Tex into a lot of trouble."

"I was hopin', sorta, that I could foller it in," said Lanky. "What did you fellers find out?"

"Nothin'," answered Hopalong, and explained the situation.

"Shucks," snorted Lanky, in derision. "Three of us are aplenty to watch this camp an' guard th' supplies an' cayuses. Let Skinny, Pete, an' Billy lay up on some of th' ledges while us three are away in th' cañons, an' I'll bet you a couple dollars there ain't enough cattle thieves in these buttes to get close enough to our packs to see what they are." He grinned hopefully.

"An' if we should come a-trippin' an' a-singin' out of some side cañon an' take th' thieves in th' rear, why, we'd settle a hell of a lot of trouble right here."

"Mebby," grunted Hopalong, stripping off his saddle and rubbing the horse's back. He turned the animal loose to make a bee line for the water. "We've got time to figger all that out. Let's start supper."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

LANKY took the first part of the night watch up on the ledge in the cañon, while Red stood the first watch on the other side of the camp, where they had entered the gorge. It had just begun to grow dark when the latter went on post, and he had not been there very long before he suddenly caught the sounds of walking horses coming in from the plain.

Silently Red listened and watched, busily planning a trap for this newcomer. If he proved to be a cattle thief returning to his headquarters after a visit to the far-away settlements along the distant river, then he was riding into a great deal of tribulation. Soon he saw an indistinct bulk loom up in the darkness, followed by another, and then quicken pace as the glowing embers of the camp fire appeared in the range of vision. Now, having this stranger between himself and the fire, and between himself and those in camp, Red threw his rifle against his shoulder and snapped a command.

"Hold up, stranger! Where you reckon yo're goin'?"

A chuckle replied to him, and a voice which he did not know answered out of the dark.

"Easy on th' trigger, friend; easy on th' trigger. I ain't figgerin' on eatin' nobody, 'though I ain't sayin'



I ain't hungry. Darn glad to have found you-all. Good thing it warn't a little later when I came to where yore tracks turned in here, or I couldn't 'a' seen 'em, an' shore would 'a' rid right on past. My eyes ain't what they uster be."

"All of which is right interestin'," growled Red over the sights. "Who are you an' what you want?"

"I'm John Winchester, an' I'm goin' prospectin', an' I want some ca'tridges that fit this here Sharps."

"Holy maverick!" muttered Red, lowering the rifle a little. "We wasn't figgerin' on you comin' up here!"

"Wasn't, hey?" snorted old John, and he chuckled again. "Well, neither was th' old woman a-figgerin' on it. Right suspicious, at first, she was; but when I tuck to my bed with rheumatics, she sorta got a mite careless: an' here I am." He paused a moment, and then asked a question a little anxiously. "Got any of them .45-120's in camp? I plumb run out of 'em, an' they cost a heap of money, *they* do."

"Got plenty of ca'tridges," laughed Red, despite the irritating thought that now they had a seventy-year-old man on their hands to hold them back and to take care of.

"Be they them Sharps .45-120?"

"They be. Got plenty of 'em."

"That's what I was a-figgerin' on," replied oid John, a note of relief in his voice. "Reckon I better ride right on in, an' git me a bite to eat. Ain't had nothin' to eat since last night."

"Go ahead," replied Red, resuming his watch, and swearing under his breath as the old man went around,

the bend in the cañon. "What in hell will we do with *him?*" he demanded savagely, and then a thought mollified him a little. "Huh! Make him th' cook, an' keep him in camp! Dodderin' old fool, travellin' around in this kind of country on a war trail!" He raised his voice and shouted a warning, although a certain sound had told him that it was not needed. "Friend comin'; don't shoot!"

Those at the camp had heard Red's challenge and the sounds of voices, and had reacted like a coiled spring suddenly released. The fire had been deserted instantly as the seated men leaped to their feet and melted swiftly into the dark, two of them slipping toward Red and his visitor. Now they were moving swiftly back to the fire, consumed with curiosity as to the identity of their unexpected guest. As they peered into the comparative darkness surrounding the faint glow of the fire they saw an old-time frontiersman emerge from the gloom, the fire light glinting on certain bits of metal about him.

"John Winchester!" exclaimed Hopalong in amazement as the bent figure rode up and stopped. "Great land of cows!"

"Yep; 'tain't nobody else," chuckled the old man, dismounting. "I played sick, snuk away from Sairy Ann, an' here I be. Supper over very long?"

"That don't make no difference," replied Hopalong, and then he introduced the visitor, and asked a question. "Hungry?"

"*An'* thirsty," admitted old John, turning his horse loose to disappear into the dark, and wrestling with the

pack on the led animal. "Ain't had nothin' ter eat or drink for a long time, mister. An' I want to tell you that this here buffaler gun shoots like all git out: never reckoned these here fancy guns could throw 'em so fur nor so clost ter th' mark. Took me all them ca'tridges you gave me ter try her out, but I reckon I got th' hang of her right well by now."

"We got boxes of ca'tridges. Help yoreself to 'em in th' mornin'," said Billy, adding a few sticks to the embers and fanning them with his hat. Then he lolled back against his rock to enjoy a good-night smoke. "Have any trouble follerin' us?" he asked.

"Hell, no!" answered old John, looking at him in surprise. "When th' time comes that I have any trouble follerin' a dozen hosses, my wife won't have ter watch me a-tall. I'll stay home, an' be glad ter. But I did have ter guess a lot, crossin' them sand hills, with th' sand skippin' like a lot of yaller fleas. Did you ever git yore face down clost ter them sand hills, an' watch th' grains hoppin' *up* hill? I warn't bothered none about tracks, seein' as I knowed whar you was a-headin' for. Got fooled just outside this cañon, though. Would 'a' went right on past except that I could just see yore sign. I never knowed thar was no water in here."

"There wasn't, a few years ago," said Hopalong, busy with the fire, pan, and coffee-pot. "It's a made reservoir, holdin' surface water. Set down, John; be ready for you right soon."

"I've been in this cañon before," said the visitor, reaching out his hand for a tin plate which Skinny

handed to him. "It shore was dry then, dry as th' buttons on th' devil's night shirt. Was that there an old cattle chip I stepped onter when I got off my hoss?" He listened to the explanations and nodded sagely. "Sounds right, an' here we are, all of us. Oughta make things pop hereabouts right lively afore we get done. Did you find anythin' else?"

"Found a single-file trail leadin' east from Ojos Verdes, that's used a little," answered Hopalong, filling the old man's plate with beans and bacon. He did not think it was necessary to tell old John about Tex, and the part he was trying to play. He already had the old man's job picked out, the same job that Red had selected. It would be a good thing to relieve one of the boys from the irksome duties of camp cook, and it would give them one more man for scouting and fighting.

"An' that's new since my time," said old John. "Did you foller it in an' see whar it leads?" His leathery old jaws had ceased chewing for a moment. "You shore oughta foller it in. It'll mebbby take you right whar you want ter go. Be a good job for *me*, I reckon."

"We can't split up our force to do that," replied Hopalong. "If it's a trail leadin' to th' gang's headquarters, it'll be watched. There are other reasons, an' good ones, why we are lettin' that trail strictly alone. We figger on makin' our try from here, an' we got to keep a guard in camp." Hopalong filled a tin cup with coffee and placed it near the old man's knee. "What we need more'n anythin' is a reg'lar cook, an' somebody to take care of th' camp. You come just

in time to do that for us; an' if you can't cook better than some I can name, I'll be plumb surprised an' disgusted."

Old John's face gave no indication of his strong indignation at the offer of such a job. Camp cook, in his eyes, was a squaw's job. He chewed earnestly and reflectively, glad that the beans were soft, for the sake of his nearly toothless gums. Camp cook! He would show this crowd that he was no squaw. In line with that determination, he glanced around the lighted circle, which was a little wider now. The immediate supplies met his gaze, and then he looked around to see one of his new companions walking out of the darkness, with three boxes in his hand.

"Here, John," said Skinny, grinning widely. "Just so you can sleep, here's some ca'tridges for that new rifle."

John Winchester nodded, his mouth being too full for verbal thanks and he placed the boxes on the ground near a knee. He now had thirty rifle cartridges, knew the direction from which they had come and was entirely satisfied. Camp cook, indeed! He finished his meal and felt for pipe and tobacco.

"Reckon it's gettin' near time to turn in," he said. "Couple of puffs an' I'm through for th' day. Hope you got plenty of 'baccy; mine's near gone." He saw the glances that instinctively pointed out the supplies under the ledge in the cañon wall and looked back at the little fire. After a few minutes, he emptied his pipe and sighed with contentment. "That gun shoots strong an' straight. I like 'em heavy, like that; they



hold better. Well, good-night, boys," and the new-comer, lying down with his feet to the fire and scorning blankets, was almost instantly asleep.

"Look at that!" muttered Hopalong after a moment. "Asleep already!"

"Well, he's got a head start," said Billy, lying down and drawing a blanket over himself; "but I reckon I can catch him. If you chumps ain't turnin' in, you might try to keep still."

At midnight, Skinny and Pete unrolled, folded up their blankets, took a drink of coffee, and moved silently into the darkness to relieve the first watch. Red and Lanky soon appeared, glanced over the little camp, settled down, and quickly added their snores to the general chorus. An hour before dawn there came a gentle movement, and old John Winchester arose on bootless feet, slipped silently to the little store of provisions near the fire, and from there into the dark in the direction Skinny had come from earlier in the night. Half an hour later, Pete, wide awake at his post in the mouth of the cañon, heard a reassuring voice behind him. He whirled like a flash and crouched low, amazed by the nearness of it.

"It's John Winchester, that rid in to-night," said the voice. "I'm goin' up ter foller that single-file trail inter th' buttes," it explained. "Warn't no use of wakin' up th' camp: them boys are plumb tired. When you hear hosses walkin' past, goin' west, you'll know that I'm with 'em."

"You get back to camp!" ordered Pete. "Nobody leaves here till daylight, 'less Hoppy says so. You

heard what he said about that Ojos Verdes trail, didn't you? That means yo're goin' to cook. Get back to camp an' stay there."

"All right, seein' you feel like that," sighed the voice and Pete strained his ears to follow the barely audible scraping of shoe leather.

Ten minutes later, a rock clattered twenty yards behind him, and he crept swiftly toward the sound, gun half raised and ready. Another rock clicked sharply and then bounced along a gravelly opening. Pete tried to spread himself, to be in two different places at once, and he became oblivious of everything but his risky game of hide and seek. If it were old John, trying to sneak past along the base of the cañon wall, he would show that person that a seventy-year-old man was not too old to be soundly spanked across a capable knee; if it were some spy, some enemy, and Pete could get his great hands on him, there would be a lesson given in the art of manhandling which one person, at least, would never forget.

Other rocks clicked here and there, and Pete became so alarmed by the apparent number of the creepers that he was on the point of calling out and arousing the camp. Then the clicking stopped, but Pete did not; and his continuing search found nothing. It must have been pieces of rotten stone falling down the cañon wall. He was still searching when the sounds of running horses came nearer from the direction of the camp, and, whirling, he ran back to his position and challenged.

To his surprise, a burst of profanity answered him, and it came in the well-known voices of Hopalong and

Lanky. They swept past him and were soon lost to his ears. Pete was puzzled by the strange events of this night, and his slow mind pondered the mysteries until dawn. Having the light in which to see, he went back among the rocks to try to solve the mystery of the falling stones, and he was hard at work on hands and knees hunting for footprints when his relief appeared from camp.

"What you doin'?" sarcastically asked Billy Williams, peering over a boulder at the intent Pete. "Huntin' four-leaf clovers?"

"Huntin' tracks, you fool," answered Pete, slowly straightening his back. "There ain't no four-leaf clovers around here; but stones was fallin' down th' wall, last night," he explained, ignoring Billy's snort of derision. "Hey! What was happenin', anyhow? First, that old Winchester feller come out here an' tried to get past me. Said he was goin' to foller that trail that Tex used. I had to chase him back to camp. Then them stones begun to fall; an' then, damned if Hoppy an' Lanky didn't go tearin' outa th' cañon, swearin' at me. What's the matter, anyhow?"

"Oh, one thing sorta led to another," replied Billy, "an' th' hull sum of 'em leads you to a steady job, mebby, for bein' a flat-head."

"What you mean?"

"You chased old John back to camp, Pete; but he didn't go there. He went to his two cayuses an' led 'em out of this here cañon, down th' middle of a sand patch right close to yore post, while you was chasin' around lookin' for fallin' stones. You don't reckon he

was mean enough to chuck them stones for you to look for while he was slippin' past, do you?"

Pete was so busy turning this matter over in his mind that he did not answer, and Billy continued:

"Hoppy an' Lanky went after him. Hoppy woke up, saw that th' old man was missin', an' got Lanky on th' jump. Lanky knows where that trail is. If they don't get old John an' bring him back, you shore got a fine an' steady job of cookin' on yore hands for bein' such a damn fool."

"But he couldn't 'a' got past me with no cayuses!" protested Pete, indignantly. "No sir; he couldn't! Nobody could!"

"They couldn't if they happened to run right smack into you, head on," admitted Billy ironically; "but with you hop-toadin' among th' boulders, why a whole regiment of cavalry could 'a' got past you. Go on in an' cook breakfast. I'm takin' yore place."

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE FIRST SKIRMISH

**B**ACK in the cañon Pete, the humbled, was cooking breakfast and trying not to hear the remarks Red was making about him. Red had just returned from a visit to Billy, the present sentry, from whom he had learned the story of Pete's failure. They were wrangling when they heard the horses coming into the cañon, and soon they saw old John Winchester and his well-loaded pack animal turn the bend in the wall. Behind him appeared Hopalong and Lanky, both grinning; but old John was not grinning. He was mournfully contemplating a steady job as camp cook.

He drew up near the fire, swung down, stripped his horse, and then moved toward the pack animal. In silence, he unloaded the horse and turned back toward the fire, from which appetizing odours were arising.

"Well," he said, "here I be. Grub smells good—better'n it does when *I* cook it!"

"Yo're grub will smell good enough," growled Pete, a frown on his face. "What you mean, sneakin' past me like that, last night?"

"I was goin' ter git track of them cow-thieves for ye," said the old man. "An' I would 'a' done it, too, only Cassidy figgered thar oughta be a re-liable man for



ter go on watch nights at th' mouth of th' cañon." He glanced over his shoulder and saw Hopalong and Lanky riding in from a short talk with Billy. "Here he comes, now. Fine man, he is; but jest a mite set in his ways; yep, jest a mite set."

"Where'd they catch you?" asked Red, holding back his laughter and reaching for the coffee-pot.

"Up north a ways," answered the old man. "Pass that coffee-pot this way. Thankee."

Hopalong and Red dismounted, dropping the reins over the heads of their horses, said a few words to their companions, and fell to eating. As he ate, Hopalong was looking up the side of the north wall and studying the lay of the camp site. Finishing his breakfast, he packed his corncob defiantly under Red's frank scowl, and arose.

"John, you know where you found th' supplies you borrowed," he said. "While yo're puttin' 'em back ag'in like you found 'em, I'll climb up above an' have a look around. Yo're camp cook, now. Help Pete red up th' camp, an' stay around it, savvy?"

He walked over to the cañon wall and climbed up it the way Red had gone the day before, and reaching the top, he looked keenly around for any smoke signal that might be rolling heavenward. He was not rewarded. The plateau he stood on was a vast one, and appeared to be level to the east and southeast, while it sloped almost imperceptibly upward in the north. From where he stood, there were only a few breaks to be seen, but he knew that it was cut by many cañons running in all directions. Westward, he looked out

over the low-lying desert plain and saw in the far distance several low, vague mountain ranges. The town of Ojos Verdes was not to be seen because it lay on the farther slope of a divide. Looking eastward again, he nodded with satisfaction: any smoke column which kept its density until it arose above the level of the plateau could be seen for a surprising distance, especially if its fuel contained moisture.

He made his way down the wall and signalled Skinny, who was lying at full length on the sentry ledge east of camp; and then he sent Pete to bring Billy in from the outer end of the gorge. Neither of the sentries had eaten yet.

"Red," he said, reflectively, "it'll take too much time if we search them cañons in pairs. We got to locate their drive trail as quick as we can. Somebody we know may be in danger, or gettin' in it; an' th' sooner we are within strikin' distance, th' better I'll feel. Th' farther in we get th' closer we'll be to any smoke signal that may go up. When Billy an' Skinny get back we'll wrangle th' cayuses, an' leave old John up above to look out for smoke sign an' to guard th' camp. We can't afford to miss that sign."

He turned to the old man.

"John, you reckon you can stay where we put you? It's an important job an' has got to be done right."

"Reckon I can stay put right tight," answered the old man. "An' there won't be nobody heavin' no rocks an' sneakin' past *me*, you betcha."

When Skinny and Billy came in, Hopalong explained what was to be done. They all were to ride into the

cañons, one man to a gorge, and to press on at good speed until noon. If no trail signs or reservoir was found in that time, they were then to return to camp.

"We know that this cañon right here has been used for a drive trail," he said. "That means that some one of us oughta find a waterin' place inside of twenty-five or thirty miles, at th' most. If we all push on at a good pace, we should be able to cover that distance by noon. John, you climb up that wall an' get set. Don't come down ag'in till one of us gets back here to take yore place. Watch th' sky for smoke, keep a good lookout over th' camp an' pack animals, an' shoot any stranger that shows up an' goes to foolin' around with either. Saddle, you boys: let's start."

In a few minutes, the clatter of hoofs rang loudly in the chasm and then died out. Old John sat cross-legged up above on the plateau to maintain his vigil on both sky and camp, his new rifle resting on his knees.

The riders pushed along rapidly, one by one leaving his friends to turn up the cañons as they were reached. Pete was the first one to turn off, Hopalong feeling that there was not much chance of him finding the telltale water hole in the first cañon. At last, Hopalong and Red rode on by themselves.

"Old John make much of a holler about bein' turned back?" asked the latter.

"Started to, but I cut it right short," growled Hopalong. "Been a hell of a note, him usin' that trail! Any rustler seein' him comin' along in Tex's tracks might easy get suspicious. Figger, mebbby, th' trail 'was gettin' to be a reg'lar highway. Old John shore

will do what he's told, from now on. I spoke right plain to him."

They came to the next branching cañon, and Red turned into it, leaving his old friend to take the next; but the next few were so small that Hopalong ignored them and kept on in the one he was in.

The hours passed quickly, and it was noon when Hopalong reached a bend and drew up, estimating the number of miles he had covered as being enough to warrant his return. Cattle could travel farther than thirty miles on a dry drive without appreciable risk: he had helped to drive them farther. He hesitated as he wheeled, and then went all the way around and pushed on again. He would have a look around the bend before going back. He rounded it and found that the chasm ran on straight for several miles; and as he traced its bottom, he suddenly grunted with pleasure. A few green trees raised their tops above a transverse ridge in the floor, and back of them there was a noticeable widening of the chasm, and a long stretch of sloping rather than perpendicular sides.

"Water!" he exclaimed, and sent his horse on at a lope.

In half a mile, he rode up the ridge and saw a reservoir, man-made, surrounded by a rich and generous pasture of thick grass. Dismounting, he left his horse and proceeded on foot, habitual caution warning him against leaving hoof prints where they would show so plainly and so plainly indicate their age. There was no thought of present danger in his mind, and he was caught un-awares when a rifle shot split the silence and crashed from wall to wall.

He heard the vicious shriek of the bullet and threw himself sideways behind a boulder. Another shot came from a gray-white cloud of smoke, and he heard his horse leap suddenly, and then the clatter of its shod hoofs rang out, grew swiftly fainter around the bend, and ceased altogether. He was on foot, more than thirty miles from camp, with at least one rustler in front of him. There was no telling how close others might be.

Crawling from rock to rock, he made his way to a place from where he could see the cañon floor beyond the reservoir. The tank, itself, presented its earthen dam, and the fresh dirt on its face told him that it had been repaired. Two shovels lay where they had been dropped, and now he knew that at least two men were opposed to him. He made out the rock walls of a rude cabin and corral back in a little niche in the cliff, and above the corral wall the heads of two horses were raised high in fear and curiosity.

A swift movement at the base of the south wall sent his heavy Sharps to his shoulder, but not in time for a shot; and then another shot roared out and a lead splotch appeared, with a scream, on the boulder just above his head. It had been fired from a moving gun, but it was close enough to satisfy the most reckless of targets. Crash after crash now filled the cañon and Hopalong shifted among the boulders until he found a safe place from which to peer out. Bullets spat and whined, some of them far to the right and some to the left, and he knew that he had not been seen while he moved. The waste of lead was somewhat reckless, but he thought he could explain it.



"Huh!" he thought. "They're shootin' to force me to keep my head down till they can get th' positions they want. If they can get me between 'em it'll be easier for them. Two to one, with me in th' middle ——" he stopped his conjectures as the horses again raised their heads.

In a flash the real reason for the rapid firing came to him, and without hesitation, although he hated to do it, he pulled trigger. One horse dropped with a swiftness that told of instant death, and the other pranced madly around the stone enclosure. A second bullet sent it high up on its hind legs to topple over backward.

"Figgerin' to leave one man here to watch me, while th' other rode back for his friends," muttered Hopalong. "Got me afoot thirty miles in th' buttes, an' aimed to play safe. All right: you now got this job to do by yoreselves, without no help, an' we'll see how safe you find it!"

The reckless firing had stopped now, since to continue it would be useless, and the game became one of silence and craft, and one in which experience would play a great part. Hopalong was crawling cautiously forward at an angle, anxious to get under a bulge in the south wall and thus gain security behind him. He had plenty of time, for his own horse had gotten away, and its appearance in camp would bring anxious friends on the jump. It was his job to get these men if he could, and if he could not get them, then to keep them from getting away.

He peered out under the lower edge of a slant-sided boulder and saw the shadow of a head and shoulder

on a rock sixty yards away. The maker of the shadow was well covered and could not be seen. He had no reason to believe that he was in grave and immediate danger, since his rocky bulwarks would turn lead. Hopalong studied the shadow and the rock on which it lay, and his gaze settled on a rounded surface a foot or two this side of it. His rifle was the most powerful type in use at that time, shooting 550 grains of lead by the force of 120 grains of powder, which was an explosive charge 50 grains heavier than the standard army load. He smiled grimly and settled down to attempt a feat which he had performed before, and one in which Red Connors was especially expert. It was one of Red's prized trick shots, and that uncanny rifleman had worked it down to a science.

Hopalong seemed to be hypnotized by that shadow and the rounded surface next to it. He drew his right-hand Colt for a quick second shot if the opportunity offered for it, placed it on the ground, and then nestled his cheek against the stock of the Sharps. He was using a rest, for the target he aimed at had to be struck exactly on one small spot. Slowly the trigger slack was taken up and his finger paused while he held his breath; and then the finger squeezed gently and steadily. There came a great roar, a low-rolling, ground-hugging cloud of black powder smoke, and a startled scream of rage and pain answered from behind the distant rock. A man rose full length from behind his cover, ripped through the upper body by a huge bullet flattened and made doubly vicious by glancing. He swayed for a moment and then fell forward across the top of the

boulder, the victim of a carom shot as true as Red Connors ever had made.

"Take *that* back to yore cattle-stealin' friends," growled Hopalong thinking of Johnny Nelson and the havoc which had visited a peaceful range. He raised his voice and shouted.

"Yo're next, Number Two! Stick up yore hands, an' save yoreself!"

"Go to hell!" came the instant reply. "You don't know what yo're stackin' up ag'in, you pore fool!"

"An' you don't know *who* yo're stackin' up ag'in," retorted Hopalong. "You can't get away, so I might as well tell you that yo're up ag'in th' old Bar 20. I shore hope yo're th' coyote that shot Nelson."

There was a moment's silence, and then a sarcastic laugh rang out.

"Bar 20!" came the voice in a jeer. "Don't you make me laugh, stranger! Bar 20! What part of th' country do you reckon yo're in? Montanny? *Ho-ho-ho!* Why, th' next thing I know, you'll be sayin' that yo're Hopalong Cassidy! *Ho-ho-ho!*"

Hopalong was cutting sage-bush branches and snipping off the stems and leaves, and while he worked as rapidly as he could, he helped to keep the conversation going. In a few minutes, he had a questionable rope of trimmed branches, one bound to another by ravellings from his shirt. It was not a rope that would hold much weight, and it did not need to be. Tying one end of it part way up the largest stem of a sage bush at one side of his boulder, he crept silently and swiftly to the left, paying out the rope as he moved. Colt in one hand

and the end of the rope in the other, he waited as he gently tugged the sage bush line. The growing stem jerked a little and stopped, making a slight rustling sound. Waiting for half a minute, he called out from his new position, shut his mouth, and waited again.

"You'd be a heap surprised if I *was* Hopalong Cassidy, an' if my cayuse brought up Red Connors an' th' others on th' jump, *wouldn't* you?"

"Stranger, *surprised* ain't th' word a-tall," came the answer in a jeer. "You shore move around a lot. Ain't gettin' nervous, are you?"

Half a minute passed in silence, and then the sage bush moved again, gently rustling. Some tumbleweed had lodged against its base, and added its dry rasping to the sound. There came an instant answering movement behind a rock not twenty yards away, where a crawling cattle thief had suddenly changed his mind and accepted his new cover. A hand pushed out past the side of the rock, holding a Colt. Again the innocent sage bush moved, this time very gently, and the tumbleweed rasped softly. The arm followed the hand and gun, and then a face, tense with eagerness and hope inched past the corner of the rock. The cruel eyes were fixed in a squint on the trembling bush, which now moved with a slight jerk, such as might be caused by a careless elbow or knee.

To the left of the trembling sage bush and at the end of the make-shift rope, Hopalong Cassidy now sprang erect, his hands down at his sides. He could not shoot down an unsuspecting man in plain sight and at such close range. Suddenly sensing his danger, the rustler

turned his face and saw Hopalong in the flesh, standing there with a grim smile on his weather-beaten countenance. Amazement and fear swept over the cattle thief's face, and his gun hand pivoted swiftly at the wrist.

The two shots sounded almost as one, and as the smoke cleared, Hopalong bent forward slightly to see the result of his fire. One look was enough, and he stepped forward as the clatter of pounding hoofs grew swiftly louder behind him and filled the cañon with their noise, the great rock walls multiplying them until it seemed as though a regiment was charging toward him. He slipped behind a boulder and then held up a hand as he stepped into sight again. Red's half-raised rifle moved swiftly and chocked into its scabbard. He pulled down to a lope and then to a walk, and grinned as he approached his friend.

"I knowed you'd get into trouble when I wasn't with you," he called, his glance taking in the scene of the battle and the results of it. "If you reckon you can ride double without fallin' off I'll give you a ride back to camp. I didn't take time to fool with yore cayuse when it passed th' mouth of my cañon." He chuckled. "They must 'a' stood right up in *plain* sight, if *you* got 'em."

"You see that water hole?" asked Hopalong. "See that hut an' th' corral? Do they mean anythin' to yore dumb head?"

Red was looking steadily at a bright, lead-coloured splotch on a certain rock, and he rode toward it slowly and in silence. Reaching it, he leaned over in the



saddle, studied the mark for an instant, and then turned to look behind him, unerringly picking out the spot from where his friend had fired that shot. He nodded knowingly, and smiled.

"Carom shot, huh? Copyin' me, ain't you? Gettin' right fancy with that fool Sharps. Ain't you ever goin' to figger somethin' out for yoreself, instead of borrowin' other folks' idears?"

"I'll show you somethin' I figgered out for myself, you carrot-head!"

"Two times two is four?" jeered Red. "That it?"

"Who told *you* that two times two is four? Read it in some almanac?"

"How'd you get th' other feller?"

"Told him I was Hopalong Cassidy, an' got him laughin'."

"Don't blame him a damn bit for laughin'," replied Red.

Hopalong weighed the remark, and looked up suspiciously.

"That so?" he demanded.

"Yeah; an' you know it's so," retorted Red, drawing rein again; and then he saw the sage-bush rope, and let his gaze run along it. "Well, I'll be damned!" he muttered, and his face broke into a grin. "Went fishin' for a sucker an' he bit! I *will* be damned!"

"Admitted," growled Hopalong. "Told you that I'd show you somethin' that I figgered out for myself. I suppose you'll be usin' it, from now on, an' claimin' that it's yore idea."

"Say!" exclaimed Red, enthusiastically. "If we

coupled that fish line idear to my carom shot—what do you think about *that*?”

“Huh!” muttered Hopalong, his eyes on the reservoir and the cabin. “They was fixin’ up th’ dam, Red. Looks like a drive is due to come through here some day right soon.”

“Yeah. They got a reg’lar line-house layout here, ain’t they? Stone, too. We better get back to camp while we can see our way. It gets damn dark in these cañons.”

“Take a cañon like this, an’ a good shot in that there stone house——” mused Hopalong, thoughtfully. In a moment he looked up and smiled. “You rustle back to camp, tell th’ boys what I found, an’ to move up here first thing in th’ mornin’. There’s four aces right together in this deck, if we don’t bungle ’em in th’ shuffle.”

“It shore looks that way,” replied Red, happily. “If it wasn’t for gettin’ th’ news back, I’d stay with you. What’ll you do for grub?”

“Yo’re a fine, first class cow-puncher, askin’ a fool question like that!” retorted Hopalong. “Didn’t you ever go without grub for twenty-four hours? Gimme some of yore tobacco, an’ then start movin’.”

Red held up his hand and looked back through the cañon. A rapidly running horse was nearing them. He slid his rifle out, turned in his saddle, and waited, not bothering to dismount and seek cover. He was willing to exchange shots with any rifleman if the conditions were anywhere near equal. In a few minutes, Lanky Smith, rifle in hand, came tearing into sight.

He and Red holstered their weapons at the same time, and the newcomer rode up, smiling with relief.

"Caught yore cayuse, Hoppy, picketed it, an' come a-runnin'. Everythin' all right?" His eyes lingered for a moment on the two bodies, and then flashed around the cañon.

"Yes," answered Red. "Take th' news back to camp before it gets too dark to see where yo're ridin'. Move it up here th' first thing in th' mornin', an' keep yore eye on old John. Me an' Hoppy are stayin' here to-night, to get in that stone hut an' hold it."

"What's th' matter with *you* goin' back an' leavin' me to stay here an' help hold th' hut?" demanded Lanky, truculently.

"Because I got here first, an' spoke first, that's why!" retorted Red. "Besides, you can't tell what might happen 'round here between now an' to-morrow noon. We got to have a couple of *good* men here. You go on back, an' help Pete an' old John."

"Look a-here, Connors! Some day me an' you are goin' to tangle, an' when that day comes, God help you! You swell-headed, bow-laigged cow wrastler, who you reckon you are, anyhow?"

"Blow on him, Hoppy, an' cool him off," snickered Red.

Lanky sneered as he wheeled his horse, finding little satisfaction in the thought of a hot supper and a hot breakfast.

"How'd you like to go to hell?" he inquired. "So-long, Hoppy: see you to-morrow." He faced Red, played an imaginary flute with one hand, whirled, and was on his way to camp.

Red looked after him, chuckling.

"Best little man in seventeen states," he grunted.

Hopalong nodded, looked over the scene of the fight, and raised his eyes until they took in the dam and the two shovels laying on it.

"Got work for yore cayuse an' yore rope, Red," he said, moving forward. "There's a couple of shovels that'll come in handy. After we get that job done, we'll corral yore cayuse an' hole up in th' house. Like to see any bunch of cattle thieves try to take it away from us, too. An', Red, don't let me forget to climb up on top th' first thing in th' mornin'. Somebody's got to watch for a smoke column all th' time th' boys are ridin' in th' cañon."

"Good thing I showed you how to make carom shots," said Red, urging his horse forward. "If one of them fellers had got away—*bub!*"

"Red, there ain't nothin' th' matter with yore head, except its size an' total emptiness," retorted his friend, plodding after him.

## CHAPTER XX

### FREEZE-OUT

**A**T THE rustlers' bunkhouse the deaths of Concho and Elbows, and the burials, caused a depression which might have been greater except that these men all lived a life of crime, and that to them strife and killing had been blunted in their effects. In the organization, itself, during the several years of its existence, there had been a number of shooting affrays, as there were bound to be, and in more than one of them Nevada had played a deadly part.

There were now nine men at the headquarters, exclusive of Tex and the cook. Two of the original fourteen had died within sight of the bunkhouse, and two more had been sent, two days before, over the drive trail to report on its grass and water. These, unknown to their friends, were also dead. Tex had offered to go on this duty and had been ignored. The two drive-trail scouts had been told to finish their work and then spend a few days at Ojos Verdes as a reward for their labours, and thus they were not expected to return for a week or more.

If Tex had known that he could find Hopalong and the others, he would have been tempted to slip away and join them, for then the smoke signal would not be



necessary, since he knew the location of the thieves' headquarters. As it was, he had to remain, give the signal, and then let circumstances shape his course of action. Perhaps he could be of more aid to Hopalong by remaining with the gang and working from the inside; but one thing was certain: the time was now at hand to work out the firing of the signal.

Since the double killing that afternoon, Tex had bent his mind to this matter. Two weeks had passed since he had entered the buttes, and Hopalong must now be close enough to see such a volume of smoke as the crevice would send up. If it was fired to-morrow, it would not be too soon. How could he get a chance to place the magnifying glass in time to fire the blaze on the following day? With the rustlers around the houses, it would be decidedly risky to make the attempt in daylight, not only because of the danger to himself, but because the blaze might arouse suspicion and put them on their guard. If enough time passed for their suspicions to die, it would not matter; but Tex knew Hopalong's precipitate nature and the natures of his companions, and he found himself half expecting an attack at any hour. If they followed the Ojos Verdes trail or the drive trail, they might appear at any moment, and when they did appear, they must not find themselves expected. The alternative was obvious: the lens had to be placed in position during the night.

He did not feel that he had been accepted unqualifiedly as a trusted member of the gang, and certainly Layton would watch him on the bare chance of pinning

something to him. To slip out of the bunkhouse without the very best of reasons for the act would be to give Layton a lead which he could be counted upon to develop to its fullest.

One of the men was in the bunkhouse, mending a shirt. Carp and a few of the others were out behind the house sprawled on the grass. Nevada was riding restlessly around in the valley, and Layton and his two friends were loafing in the scant shade of the corral fence. This trio, because their visit to Ojos Verdes had been postponed in order to rush the work of rebranding and collecting cattle for the drive, had been told they could start for the town on the following day. The others would mark time until the two drive-trail scouts reported, and then begin the round-up for the drive.

Tex finished arranging his bunk, changed his under-clothing and shirt, and then wandered toward the gallery leading to the kitchen on his way to join Carp and his companions. As he entered the kitchen, he remembered that he had run out of matches, and he paused to look around for a supply. A shelf caught his eye, a shelf with rows of canned vegetables. A long line of canned corn intrigued him with the bright, idealized labels, and he caught himself thinking how much he liked canned corn, and how much it disagreed with him. In a flash, the solution of a vexatious problem presented itself, and he turned to speak to the cook.

"Charley, I see corn; canned corn by th' dozen," he announced, a little wistfully. "It's been a long time since any of us have had any corn. Must it allus be beans, an' beans, an' more beans? Why can't we

have some corn once in a while? Why not to-night, for supper? What you think about it?"

"You likee corn? Velly tired beans?" asked Charley, grinning.

"Charley, I'm extremely damn tired of beans. So are most of th' boys. If you didn't have nothin' else, then beans would be all right; but with all that corn, why not use some of it for a change?"

"I cook corn to-night," promised Charley. "Evelly-body likee change, one time, two time. Beans too much allee time, anyhow. How you likee stling bean, tomollow, sucytas? How you likee 'em?"

Tex shook his head emphatically.

'You make it corn to-night. We'll have string beans, tomatoes, or succotash some other time. You do that, Charley, an' gimme some matches."

Charley agreed to the requests, and turned to lift down the necessary cans of corn as Tex stuffed the matches in his pocket and strolled out to the little grass plot.

Here he found wide grins, his conversation with the cook having been overheard. His own grin grew wider as he looked at the smiling faces.

"I'm like a loco-eatin' cayuse," he observed, as he sat down near Carp and crossed his legs. "Corn allus disagrees with me, but I keep goin' back to it, just th' same. After the' beans I've had for th' last couple weeks, I'll eat all th' corn I can hold at supper, an' then I'll be tied up in knots, mebby, an' have one hell of a night. We're a funny lot of animals, us humans."

"We are," said Carp, reflectively, thinking of a taste and weakness of his own.

"Well, anythin' is better than beans, for a change," said Irish. "Th' first thing we know we'll all turn into beans. Corn never bothered *me*, nowhow. Mebby it's because I chew it good."

"Nor me," spoke up Carp. "But whisky allus makes me sick, an' I allus swear I'll never get drunk ag'in; but I do, ever' so often. We shore are funny critters."

"You don't have to tell *me* that whisky makes you sick," jibed Irish. "I know all about you an' whisky. Every time you go on a bender, I swear I won't never go on another with you; but I do, just th' same. Yo're sure one buck-jumpin' *bombre* when you get yore dose of likker."

"All of which ain't leadin' no lamb to slaughter," said Carp, introducing a subject dear to his heart. "What I want to know is: Will Mr. Riley, th' first-class, professional gambler in our midst, take away our money at penny-ante to-night?"

Tex bowed gravely.

"Mr. Riley will do his level best to take away all th' money he can at penny-ante, Mr. Carp," he said. "There's one thing I'd like to know: Am I supposed to go up ag'in five or six players, or will everybody play for hisself, an' not specially ag'in me?"

"It wouldn't be fair to jump on to you in no mob," chuckled Carp. "An' likewise, it wouldn't prove nothin' satisfactory. We will all play for ourselves, of course."

Gila leaned back against the house and smiled.

"Draw poker or stud-hoss?" he asked.

"Draw," answered Carp quickly, that being his favourite game. "Let's see who'll be in th' game. There's me, Tex, Gila, Irish, Ben, an' Charley. Layton an' his two friends can go p'umb to hell, far's I'm concerned. They don't none of 'em set in no game that I set in. Either one of 'em would 'a' killed Elbows if they thought they had a good chance. Them four shore stuck together right tight. Nevada won't play penny ante, an' don't very often play any kind of poker. That makes a nice little game."

The conversation rambled along about poker and various other subjects until Nevada joined the circle. He had just come from a ride over the valley, and his face wore a frown.

"Gila, there's quite some Triple A's got into th' drive cattle," he said. "Somebody's been careless about closin' th' cañon gate. Better take these boys tomorrow mornin' an' cut 'em back where they belong. Don't count on Layton, White, or Hammond; they're goin' to town for a few days off."

Gila nodded with the others, and Nevada turned to go to his own quarters, which were in the third and last cabin of the three. This was his office as well as dwelling, and in it he had the safe in which he banked the money belonging to the outfit. It was not a very large safe, or it could not have been brought into the buttes; but it was cartridge- and ax-proof and it held very large bills, mostly.

"Hey, Nevady," said Curley. "We're goin' to have canned corn for a change, to-night."



"It's about time Charley strung his bets different," replied Nevada as he paused; and then he turned all the way around and looked at Tex.

"We lost two men to-day, Riley," he said, slowly. "Layton an' you look like th' next pair to make trouble. You told me out yonder that you wouldn't draw unless Layton did. I'm holdin' you to that. As it stands now, you've called him a liar three, four times. It ain't necessary to add no more. Th' next play should come from him. If he makes it, you got to meet it, of course; but don't make things worse unless you have to."

"If Layton minds his own business an' keeps his mouth shut, I ain't got no call to mind his business for him," replied Tex. "I'm a new man here, an' if I let one damn fool ride me, everybody'll be doin' it. I ain't lookin' to make enemies, for that would be a foolish thing to do. It strikes me that th' best play is not to put us on th' same job too often."

Nevada nodded, smiled, and departed.

Carp leaned forward and shook a finger.

"Riley," he said, earnestly. "Same job or not th' same job, you keep watch on Layton. Don't you gamble with that *hombre* if he makes a funny move. Just *get* him!"

Gila frowned at the speaker.

"Strikes me, Carp, that yo're shootin' off yore mouth where it ain't needed," he said. "Don't you fan no fire. We was talkin' about penny-ante, wasn't we?"

"We was, some time ago," growled Carp. "Just now I'm givin' Riley——"

"Glub pile! Glub pile!" Charley stuck his head out of the window. "*Glub pile!*" He drew back again as the rush followed his words.

After the edge had been taken from appetites the outfit began to leaven the meal with jerky conversation having to do with the approaching card game, which for some reason aroused unusual interest and some mirth.

Carp looked at Nevada and chuckled.

"Better set in this here game," he said, grinning.

"Don't play penny-ante," answered Nevada pleasantly. "Don't want to set in, but I aim to watch th' game."

"Penny-ante!" sneered Layton. "*Penny-ante!*" He reached for another helping and laughed nastily, looking at Tex. "I reckon that's about Riley's size, however." Layton, himself, had been a professional gambler, which was a fact known to everyone present except Tex.

Tex helped himself to the corn for the third time and looked up, his face crinkled with genial good humour.

"There ain't no need to play penny-ante," he observed. "We talked that at first because I was figgerin' on leavin' th' buttes an' travellin'on, an' I didn't want to lose too much. Now that I'm one of th' crowd an' aim to stay here, I don't need no gamblin' stake. We'll play th' reg'lar bunkhouse game, an' after it's over, I'd like to try a whirl with Layton, two-hand, draw or stud, till one of us goes busted. *That's Riley's style, an' size.*"

"Huh!" sneered Layton, aggressively. "After you get through with th' six-hand game you won't have

nothin' left; an' I don't play for buttons. These boys ain't th' suckers that tin-horns go lookin' for."

"Mebby they ain't," replied Tex, laughing; "but you look like one. Play or shut up. Talk's mighty cheap." He dug down in his pockets and produced two fat rolls of bills. Putting one of them on the table, he tossed the other to Nevada.

"Keep that, Nevada, so I can play Mr. Layton for somethin' more than buttons, after th' other game is over. There ought to be four hundred dollars there," he announced. Picking up the roll from the table he slipped off five bills, and handed them to Nevada. Then he looked at Layton.

"There's a hundred, Layton, that says I won't lose th' rest of this roll in th' first game; an' I'll play till th' game busts or is called off. When I find a ripe sucker I allus press th' play. That hundred makes a mark for you to toe, before we forget that it's up."

"Who ever heard of two-hand poker," growled Layton, derisively.

"Not everybody, mebbby; an' I don't think much of it, myself," said Tex. "It ain't no game for folks to play for amusement; but it is right deadly, an' fast. Seein' that we been talkin' about poker, an' you objected to penny-ante, I'm doin' what I can to suit you. If you don't want to play two-hand poker, or are scared of it, we can cut cards; but that don't take no skill a-tall. That bein' so, mebbby it's more in yore line?"

Carp was becoming alarmed. It was all right for himself and his friends to trim Riley with a marked

deck, but he did not intend that Layton should derive any profit from those same cards. He tried to kick Riley under the table, and succeeded; and the swift but faint look of reassurance on Tex's face puzzled him. All right; if Tex played Layton, it would be with the regular cards, and not with Long Ben's trained deck. He would see to that.

Tex pushed back from the table, eyeing the remainder of the corn accusingly.

"Well, I ate it," he remarked, gloomily; "an' now I reckon I'm in for a night of trouble. Let's get th' game goin' before th' corn starts ridin' me."

He looked at Layton.

"You ain't covered my hundred," he said, and laughed.

Carp guffawed, purely for effect; and it had the effect desired.

"An' he ain't goin' to, neither," sneered Carp, and laughed again.

"Nevady!" snapped Layton, flushing. "Draw six, seven hundred dollars outa th' safe for me, an' put a hundred of it on top of Riley's bet."

He leered at Tex.

"*You* come in here with a few hundred dollars an' start hollerin' about gamblin'! I got two years' earnin's in that safe, an' I'll break you with it! I'll play you two-hand poker with that very same deck. I'll do more than that, too! The loser packs up an' gets outa these buttes!"

"Th' loser takes his lickin' like a man an' stays right here!" interposed Nevada, scowling. "We've already

lost two men to-day; an' I ain't figgerin' on losin' no more."

"Yo're goin' to lose another, just th' same!" retorted Layton, angrily. "Riley called me a liar to-day, an' these here buttes ain't big enough to hold th' two of us!"

"Shut yore mouth!" snapped Nevada, leaning forward. "You had yore chance then an' there an' didn't take it."

Riley slipped off his gun belts and hung them on pegs in the wall.

"I'm aimin' to be peaceful," he said, calling attention to them, and then looked at Layton.

Nevada nodded, his hand resting on a gun.

"You don't need 'em while I'm in th' house, Riley," he said, significantly. "Strikes me that was a good play. Better follow it, Layton, before you get yoreself into trouble."

Layton sneered and obeyed, Tex having disarmed him by his act. He hung the belts over the back of a chair and slouched to the other end of the room. A few moments later a six-handed game of draw poker was under way, under a special stipulation. Riley's stakes amounted to four hundred dollars, and in order that the big game should stop in time for the two-handed game, it was agreed that four hundred dollars was to be the limit of any man's losses, and that any one who lost that sum would be forced to withdraw.

It would be wearying to follow the play of this first game. In the beginning, Tex lost small sums pretty steadily, but when he won it was usually against the same men. In less than an hour, Curley and Ben were



forced to quit playing. The game now became fast, as any table-stake game may easily become. Irish was the third man to be forced out, and Carp had begun to grumble about Riley's run of luck. He found that marked cards were all right when a man held the markers, but somehow he did not handle many of them. He was the fourth man to quit, and as he withdrew he found consolation in the thought that Layton, gambler as he was, would find himself taking a first-class licking. With only two remaining in the game Tex looked up at Gila and smiled.

"Gila, you can't beat luck an' skill both," he said. "We're both winners. What you say about callin' this off so th' two-hand game can start?"

Gila nodded and pushed back. He had turned his original four hundred dollars into twice that sum, and was content to sit back and watch a deadlier and swifter game, a stud-horse grudge fight.

## CHAPTER XXI

### PROMISES FULFILLED

TEX tossed the cards on the table, counted his money, and placed it in front of him.

"There's sixteen hundred there," he announced, and held out his hand to Nevada. "I win that bet, I reckon."

Nevada glanced perfunctorily at the scowling Layton, who nodded slowly, and passed over the stakes. Then he handed Tex the four hundred he had been holding for the stud game, and settled back to watch the duel.

"Twenty-two hundred, even," said Tex, dividing it, and putting half in his pocket. "Dig up that measly six or seven hundred that you had Nevada get for you, Layton. Let's have quick action, an' get it over with." He glanced at the money in front of him. "Table stakes, I reckon?"

Layton walked over to Nevada, bent down, and said something in a low voice. Nevada looked up quickly, an expression of surprise on his face. At Layton's confirmatory nod, he arose and hastened from the room and house, and when he returned he had his hands filled with large bills. These he handed to their owner, obtained Layton's signature to an entry in an

account book, and resumed his former seat. He felt sure that he was going to enjoy the fireworks.

Carp was scooping up the deck, and Irish was bringing another from a shelf.

"What you fellers doin'?" snapped Layton, angrily. "Let them cards alone! You heard how I made that agreement? We play with th' same cards, or not a-tall!"

"Another man worryin' about what cards are used," chuckled Tex. "You fellers shore are particular. Let 'em lay, Carp: cards are cards. What's th' difference, anyhow?"

Hammond was whispering in Layton's ear, and apparently his words had weight. Tex had played for two hours with that Long Ben deck, and had won with it. That was time enough for a professional gambler to learn a deck, and, perhaps, to make certain improvements of his own in the matter of the design on the backs.

Layton made up his mind quickly. He felt that he was between the devil and the deep sea, and prudence counselled withdrawal from the game; but pride must not be further sacrificed to this man.

"All right," he said. "Put th' other deck in play, Carp, if Riley's willin'. Mebby he won't be so lucky with a deck he ain't had his paws on."

"Use any cards you want," replied Tex. "I don't play my game as much with th' cards as I do with what I've learned about men," said Tex, quietly. "I learned a lot about you this afternoon, Layton; learned all I need to know. Yo're a cautious man, not to say

anythin' more. If yo're as cautious with cards as you are with guns, this game is goin' to be a long one. Set down there an' take yore lickin'."

Layton's face was like a thundercloud, and the poorly repressed anger which had seethed in him all afternoon and evening was boiling over.

"Yo're a liar, Riley!" he shouted. "I'll show you how cautious I am! I'll show you with cards to-night, an' with guns to-morrow!" He stamped to the table and slammed his money down on it. "Twenty-two hundred!" he cried with a sneer. "*Twenty-two hundred!* You figgered yo're twenty-two hundred would be ag'in my six hundred, an' that you could ride out runs of hard luck with it that would clean me out. I saw th' idear, an' beat it. There's an even five thousand, you tin-horn. We play table stakes an' stud-hoss. You said somethin' about a game bein' fast. That's *my size!*"

He whirled to face Hammond, his eyes blazing.

"Jim, if you see that card sharp make a crooked play, blow his head off!"

"Jim'll be too busy dodgin' my lead to blow anybody's head off!" said Carp, facing Hammond. "We run in a marked deck on Riley, an' he beat us with it. Now that he's got an honest deck, I'll back him ag'in any man in th' house. Who wants a thousand, even money, or any part of it?"

"I'll take that!" shouted Layton. "An' after this game is over we'll examine th' cards. If there's a mark on 'em, Riley answers for it!"

"Just a minute," said Tex, arising. "There's nothin'

to stop Layton from markin' a few cards for me to get blamed for. Here's a better suggestion: if any marked cards are found after this game, me an' Layton shoot it out before breakfast. I'm th' only man in this game that don't have to mark cards to win; an' if Layton marks 'em, I'll use 'em to clean him out. Then I'll kill him before breakfast. Never in all yore life, Layton, have you ever set into a game like this one is goin' to be!"

"That suits me!" snapped Layton. "It would suit me better if I knowed th' game was goin' to be played honest."

"We'll do what we can to make th' game honest," replied Tex, calmly. "We'll agree that any man caught cheatin' forfeits his whole pile."

"An' that suits me!" exulted Layton. He had been a first-class gambler in his day, an expert; and he never had heard anything among the gamblers about Tex Riley, who must have been a lesser light to have been thus unknown. There was no penalty on cheating, he reflected, which tacitly was to be allowed; the penalty was imposed on being caught cheating. This man Riley was a conceited fool. Layton leered as he leaned forward over the table.

"That shore suits me," he repeated, and laughed ironically.

The game began cautiously, each feeling out the other, with an occasional big bet. It ran about even for a while, and then Tex began to press it. The hole cards were almost hypnotic in their interest among the audience, and as each round was dealt and the bets



changed, a tension gripped every man but the players. Layton's coolness, when once the game began, and his dexterity in handling the cards, hinted to Tex that the man was no amateur; and it did not take Tex long to sense that he was playing against a really good gambler. Marked cards would not escape detection in this game, and if cheating occurred it would be in other ways. Several large bets in succession kept the crowd on its toes, and Carp's laughter rang out loudly with three quarters of them. In an hour, Layton's pile had been cut in half, and he became cautious, sensing that his opponent was a better player than he ever had met before.

While Layton grew cautious, Tex apparently became reckless. He bet an even hundred on the hole card as soon as it was dealt in every hand, forcing Layton to do the same or quit the hand. Mathematically, on this betting, the chances were even; and Tex's resources now being twice as great as Layton's, the advantage lay with him. He could lose more bets than he won and ride out the losses longer. Layton had to see these hole-card bets and to risk at least a hundred dollars on every hand. He could not trim his sails with caution and make his plays wholly on the entire hand.

This hole-card plunging was making Layton desperate. It left him no option to accept small losses instead of running into heavier. At least a hundred dollars changed hands on every deal, and this was not the only burden he bore. He felt certain that Riley had cheated several times, but he could not prove it; and this further forced his hand. If he played honestly, he

could not win, and so he, too, began to cheat. Had he known that it was Tex Ewalt and not Tex Riley who sat across from him, playing Tex Ewalt's favourite game, he would have known that his opponent was not cheating. This knowledge, however, was denied him; and he began to meet imagined cheating with real cheating.

Tex let him go on with it, like an angler playing a fish. He gave no sign that he suspected that Layton's playing was not what it should have been; and Layton, encouraged in the cheating, while still losing in money, became even more reckless and desperate. And then came the last game of the night. When Layton picked up the cards to shuffle them, Tex said something that made him doubly desperate.

Carp sat close to Tex's left hand, while Gila and Nevada sat close to his right, not one of the three missing a movement. Tex looked at them, and then back to Layton.

"Layton," he said, "we been stringin' along like a couple of kids playin' marbles. Beginnin' with this hand I'm bettin' five hundred blind on th' hole-card, an' seein' if I can't bring this game to a finish. I'm gettin' tired of playin', an' that cussed corn is startin' in to raise hell with me."

Layton nodded as calmly as he could and went on with his shuffling, taking a little longer than usual, as though his thoughts were on the big bets to come and not on what he was doing. At last, he placed the deck on the table for the cut. Tex split it and in handling the cards he turned the upper half of the pack so that its

bottom card could be seen by Nevada, Gila, and some of the others. The flourish completed, he carelessly put it on the table, placed the other half of the deck on top of it, and pushed the pack toward Layton for the deal. The division where the cards had been cut could be seen by the dealer as he picked up the deck because the sides had not been squared; and as Layton's hands swiftly reached out, Tex turned carelessly to smile at Carp and exchange a few words of banter. This took only a moment, and when he looked back again Layton was beginning the deal, his hands moving swiftly, having by now become warmed up and quite deft from the practice they had enjoyed. He dropped the hole cards and waited."

"Just as I said: five hundred on th' hole," said Tex calmly, placing the named amount on the table in front of him.

Layton hid his elation, covered the bet in the same calm manner he had covered other bets, and dealt the second round.

A jack fell to Tex and a five to the dealer.

"Layton, how much money you got there?"

The dealer counted slowly, and named the amount; and Tex, counting off an equal amount, pushed it out on the table.

"We'll try to end th' game right here," he said. "I'm bettin' that on th' whole hand. Saves time. Deal 'em out."

Tex's third was a queen and Layton's a six. The fourth round gave a ten to Tex and a four to the dealer. As Layton touched the deck to deal the last cards,

Tex reached swiftly across the table, placed his hand over the dealer's and the deck, and spoke.

"Just a minute, dealer," he said, pleasantly. "There's somethin' I want to understand right plain, so we won't have no arguments."

Layton sneered and waited, poorly hiding his eagerness.

"Everybody heard us agree that a man caught cheatin' in this stud-hoss game forfeited his whole pile," said Tex, his eyes on Layton. "Is that right, you fellers?"

Affirmation came slowly or eagerly, as the crowd pressed in a little closer.

"That's what I thought," said Tex. "Nevada, what card was on th' bottom of th' upper half of th' deck when I lifted it just now for th' cut?"

"Diamond ten," answered Nevada and Gila in one breath, as other endorsements came from behind them.

"Who saw me place th' upper half on th' table, an' then put th' lower half on top of it?" asked Tex, and nodded grimly as the crowd answered in one breath.

"Then that ten of diamonds ought to be on th' bottom of th' deck right now, hadn't it?"

The answering replies were explosively affirmative.

"I got a feelin' that it ain't," said Tex. "Nevada! Take that deck out of Layton's hand an' turn it over careful, so th' bottom card won't shift. Layton, *don't* you move yore hand!"

Nevada arose and went around the table, took the cards carefully from the dealer's hand, and turned them over. An eight of spades was the bottom card.

"I claim th' forfeit on a switched cut," said Tex, pushing back, and was surprised to feel a Colt shoved into his hand. He passed it across his knees to his right hand, which was the more expert of the two, and waited. Carp hastily arose and stepped back from the table, weaponless now.

"When I made that cut I didn't square th' deck, an' I turned my head an' spoke to Carp for a moment," explained Tex. "Somethin' told me I made a mistake, doin' that, an' th' eight of spades proves it. I claim th' forfeit."

Layton sprang to his feet, his face livid with rage, and his hand darted under his coat, to reappear with a flat Derringer in it. It looked like Tex's shoulder holster gun. There came a deafening roar and a violent cloud of smoke from Tex's side of the table. The Derringer exploded upward, its bullet entering the ceiling. Layton dropped back on his chair, stopped there for a moment in a slumped heap, and then slipped to the floor.

Nevada's gun was in his hand and levelled on Tex, whose own hand now slowly appeared without the gun and rested beside its mate on the table.

"I claim he drew first. I claim he cheated, got caught, an' then drew," said Tex. "I still claim his stakes."

"I claim a thousand from th' safe, on my bet!" cried Carp.

"Where'd you get that gun, Riley?" demanded Nevada, icy with rage.

"I slipped it to him about fifteen seconds before he needed it," said Carp, proudly. "I knowed Layton had



that Derringer. Watched him when he left th' supper table an' saw him foolin' around Riley's bunk. After a while, I wandered over there an' fooled around, too. Riley's fool shoulder holster was empty. I won a thousand from Layton on our bet, an' I want it before we divide his cache."

Nevada grudgingly slid the Colt back into its holster and swore helplessly. Now Layton was gone, through his own stubbornness and poor judgment. He leaned over the table and swept Layton's stakes across it toward Tex and turned to leave the house, swearing steadily.

"Hey!" cried Carp. "Don't forget I won a thousand!"

"Aw, go to hell!" snapped Nevada, whirling in a burst of rage. He stood silent and quivering for a moment, whirled again, and stamped through the door and out of sight into the darkness.

Tex reached down, took the Colt from the floor and placed it on the table. Then he raked in the stakes, stuffed his pockets with them, and handed the weapon back to its owner.

"Much obliged, Carp," he said. "I'll mebbly get a chance to square it." He walked to where he had hung up his own guns, and stopped to bend over a little on his way back with them.

"Got a lot of money there," said Carp, grinning, and flashing a look at Hammond and White. "Better take it to Nevada an' have him lock it in th' safe."

Tex straightened up, a slight look of distress on his face.

"That ain't necessary, *now*," he said, his hand going to his stomach. "Damn that corn! It's startin', just like I knowed it would."

"What's th' hole cards?" asked Gila, curiously, and faced them up, to see an ace in Tex's hand, and an eight in the dealer's. He looked curiously at the four cards, and grunted in surprise. The dealer's showed an eight, five, six and four; Tex's, an ace, jack, queen, and ten. Here were the makings of two straights, of which the dealer's would be the smaller.

Carp reached out and turned the deck over, in the proper position, and dealt a card to each hand in the right order. A seven fell to Tex and an eight to Layton, giving the former a four-card straight, and to the latter a pair of eights.

Tex smiled as he glanced at the cards.

"When he gave me them sucker baits, an' his own hand was so poor, I just played strong, like a fool would. You see, I knowed it wasn't comin' to no show-down." He rubbed the stubble on his chin, and laughed softly. "I didn't square th' deck on purpose, an' then I looked away. When I looked back he was ready to deal, an' he looked right cheerful when he covered my first bet. You see, I don't play as much with th' cards as I do with what I've learned about men."

"An' you didn't actually see him switch th' cut?" demanded Irish, incredibly.

"Why, no; I didn't have to," answered Tex, and turned toward his bunk. "Come on, boys; it's late. I won't get much sleep to-night, but I want all that's comin' to me."

"Holy mavericks!" muttered Irish. "An' Layton called you a tin-horn!"

The next day found a sleepy crew riding off to cut out and throw back the stray Triple A cattle that had worked into the drive-trail herd. As Riley had gloomily prophesied, he had spent a restless night, and he was sleepy and tired; but he made no comment and cheerfully took his place in Gila's work squad, very anxious to get away from the houses and to stay away until noon. Hammond and White had left a few minutes before, bound for Ojos Verdes and a spree. The early morning hours passed slowly as the Triple A's were cut out, and it was between half past ten and eleven o'clock when the little herd was finally bunched for a drive into Valley Two.

A sudden exclamation, loud and profane, caused all heads to turn toward the speaker. The sight which met their eyes was both surprising and awe-inspiring. A sheet of flame was streaking up the side of the great cliff behind the houses, and the crevice was a roaring furnace, from which arose massive pillars of smoke to climb heavenward and to bend gracefully in the light wind. The first flash of fire had already died out along the bottom of the cliff, but the burning sage, greasewood, and green cedars were sending up towering masses of smoke which, in that atmosphere, could be seen for a hundred miles.

"Tex!" shouted Gila. "Watch these cattle! Th' rest of you come with me, damn *pronto!*" The *segundo*, cursing with his cursing companions, led his racing

squad at top speed for the cabins. His anxiety was wasted, for by the time that he and his men reached the houses, they were out of danger. A frightened Chinese cook and an enraged rustler chief had taken care of that, and were now engaged in a heated and acrimonious argument concerning wood ashes and carelessness; and Gila and Carp arrived just in time to avert a tragedy.

## CHAPTER XXII

### HOPALONG RIDES ALONE

**H**OPALONG and Red, after spending the night in the stone house near the reservoir, awakened at dawn, pulled in their belts for breakfast, and separated. Red remained in the house to hold it against possible attack, and Hopalong went up the side of the cañon to keep watch on the top of the plateau for smoke columns. He lay near the edge of the mesa, where he could glance occasionally into the cañon; but most of his attention was given to the horizon.

Time passed slowly, and the mounting heat, tempered neither by the moderate altitude nor by a faintly stirring wind, made the vigil an ordeal. Ten o'clock came and went, and the watcher realized that he must maintain his uncomfortable position until well past noon, since the rest of his party could not appear any earlier. He rolled over and looked down into the cañon again, tracing it as far as he could from his lofty vantage point; and discovered nothing of interest. The cabin gave no indications of being occupied, and Red's horse was picketed west of the building and sheltered by it from the view of any one who might ride up from the east. He shifted back to his former position and glanced carelessly and lazily around the horizon again; and stiffened at what he saw.



Northeast of him, at a distance indeterminate, a plume of smoke climbed upward in a rolling billow, and while he watched it, the lighter coloured smoke faded out while the column shrunk. In a few moments, it became a finger of slaty blue which maintained its density at the maximum for quite some time, and then began to grow less in size and tone, and slowly, reluctantly, died out altogether.

"Good boy, Tex!" muttered Hopalong, exultantly. He took the butt of a Colt and drew a deep line in the soil, which pointed accurately in the direction of the signal. This would endure after the smoke died out and indicate, beyond any question, the right direction.

"Good boy, Tex!" he muttered again. "You must 'a' set fire to aplenty, to make *that* signal!"

Taking his rifle he worked down into the cañon and called out as he approached the house.

"Hey, *Red!*" he shouted, his voice sounding like a cheer. "Tex fired it! She went up! Went up clean to th' sky! Straight northeast of here, it was!"

Red stuck his head out of the doorway, properly suspicious; but one look at the expression on his friend's face sent his own homely countenance into a grin of joy and belief.

"He's th' boy you can put yore money on!" he shouted. "How far away was it, Hoppy?"

"You know what distances are in this country," replied Hopalong. "There wasn't nothin' I could figger distance by, nothin' of known size. It looked like he set a whole woods on fire, but we don't know that, or how big it really might 'a' been. I'll gamble

it ain't less than sixty miles, an' it may be half again as much. Anyhow, what difference does *that* make? We know th' *direction*, don't we?"

"We do if *you* knowed it, an' ain't forgot it already!"

"Oh, is *that* so? Well, I took cussed good care to mark it on th' ground, in case some damn fool got to actin' nat'ral; an' *now* I'm glad I did!"

Red glanced swiftly up the cañon, and then leaned lazily against the door jamb. His face was beaming and every fibre of his body seemed to have become eager.

"Looks like we're at th' end of a long an' mean journey, or blamed near th' end of it," he said, chuckling. "In another couple of days, we'll be within gunshot of them coyotes; an' when that time comes, I'll shore call it square for th' railroad trains an' th' desert. Gettin' like old days ag'in, Hoppy!"

"Makes a feller sorta tingle, don't it?" replied Hop-along. "Only wish Buck an' Johnny were here to make it complete; but Buck sent us, an' we're here to help th' Kid, so it could be worse." His smile grew less, and, for a moment, his eyes looked troubled. "There's Tex, right in with them fellers; an' there's Jane, up with Buck, waitin' an' waitin'." He paused and gently shook his head. "I'd feel a lot better if Tex was out of it, safe an' sound, an' on his way north."

"Mebby we can get him out of it before we start things," said Red. "Looks like we got to: we can't bust loose regardless until we know about him."

"Red," said his companion, decisively, "I'm goin' to find out about him before we start th' powder burnin'.

If th' boys get here in time, we'll push on to the next water hole an' camp there; an' th' next mornin' I'm goin' to pack me some grub an' push on ahead. You take charge an' come on with th' outfit. You can cache it in some side cañon, or leave it at th' last water hole with old John, an' then scout ahead of it. When you get to th' end of the cañon, hole up an' wait for me. If you hear shootin' before I get back, come a-runnin' with all hands."

"You've picked yoreself a *two*-man job, Hoppy," said Red, his eyes glinting at this hope of action. "We'll *both* go on ahead, an' leave Skinny or Lanky in charge of th' rest."

"You damn flat-head!" snapped Hopalong, looking him squarely in the eyes. "*I'm* goin' up there to try to get a *married* man out of danger; you reckon I want to take *another* into danger?"

"But it's too risky, Hoppy, for one man!" countered Red, his fighting look beginning to show. "You'll get yoreself killed, goin' alone!"

The meaning of the words was innocent enough, but there was something in them, some subtly hidden quality which conveyed a peculiar meaning to Hopalong, and one which made him scowl and flush. To suggest to a friend that it is within the remote possibilities that he would not shrink from committing a carefully masked suicide is rather an indelicate thing no matter how delicately it is put.

Hopalong's face softened and he slowly reached out both hands and rested them on his companion's shoulders, looking steadily and kindly into the searching,

probing eyes of the man before him. The seconds passed, and then Red's own face softened as he read the thoughts of a man as square and loyal and considerate as ever had lived.

"Red," said the older man, "you know that when I go, I'll go fightin'. You know that I won't quit like a yaller dog; not now, anyhow. There *was* a time—but that's past an' gone, like my wife an' boy. Most of my happiness went when they did; but now there's Jane an' Tex, you an' Jennie, to think about. What's th' use of talkin'? I'm goin' in there to find Tex an' to try to get him out. I'm goin' in with my old Sharps an' my old Colts; an' I'm goin' in like th' man you knowed five, ten years ago. I'm goin' in with th' ripe experience of a busy life, an' what brains I've got I'm figgerin' to use. I'm goin' in like a cattle-stealin' Comanche, an' I'll do my damndest to get out ag'in. I'll shake hands with you on that, Red; an' that's all th' proof I can offer you."

"It's aplenty, Hoppy!" said Red, his throat husky and aching. He took the hand and closed upon it with a grip that almost paralyzed; and then he turned around and walked toward the reservoir, lest he make more of a fool of himself. Red was no weakling, no sentimental ass; but to strong men there come at times emotions which tear them like the rack and wheel. Since the death of Hopalong's wife and son, Red had watched his friend unceasingly, sacrificing his ease, his home life, and his family that he might prevent that which he so deadly feared; that he might give some solace, some comfort to his old friend in that friend's hours of

greatest need. They had wandered more than a year together and shared privations and dangers side by side in a companionship which, at first, was wordless for a day at a time. That had been three years before, and since then, the need for Red's watchfulness had worn off. Right now, the latter did not believe that his friend would deliberately let himself be shot; but there are canny touches of caution which go to strengthen courage rather than to weaken it; there are situations when a fighting man, by the neglect of some minor factor, will shake hands with Death; there are moments when a foolish, heedless courage will accomplish less than a canny one; and it was this degree of recklessness which Red had feared. He had been haunted by the picture of his old friend walking deliberately forward behind smoking guns against heavy odds, stubbornly and exultantly refusing cover or caution, to die with his boots on, and, in dying, to solve all vexatious problems. Now, with the pressure of his friend's grip still numbing his hand, Red knew that this would not be; and he blinked and cleared his throat as he called himself a fool.

Noon came and passed, and it was well past mid-afternoon before the clatter of hoofs filled the cañon, ushering in the head of a column of horses with Lanky and Skinny in the lead. They reached the cabin and gathered around their two friends while the news was told, and cheers bounced from wall to wall, filling the chasm with clamour. Swiftly the packs were removed, the animals turned loose to drink and graze, and a crackling fire cooked food for Red and Hopalong, food which was to roll four meals into one.



The following day saw them reach the next water hole, where the afternoon passed in cheerful talk. Plans were discussed, and the mumbled protests of the loyal four were stilled when Hopalong had explained the need for his solitary mission. One man would be less conspicuous than two and would not weaken the main force so much. They decided on what supplies should be cooked for him, and fell to planning anew.

Night found another guarded camp which slept peacefully until dawn, and when Hopalong mounted to ride ahead, the work of packing already was beginning. Red could be trusted to take that pack train as far as he dared, and then to leave it and push on with his friends as far as the cover would serve them. Old John had philosophically accepted his job of horse nurse and camp keeper, and could be trusted to do his very best at both; for he realized that, in this situation, which might easily become ticklish, they also serve who only stand and wait; and with him waited a new Sharps buffalo gun which he was anxious to test on bigger game than had fallen to it so far.

Now knowing the direction, and being further assured from time to time by the faint marks of Hopalong's trail, and the trail signs of the two rustlers who would ride no more, Red pushed on without hesitation and reached, with no surprise whatever, another man-made reservoir as twilight threatened. This had been the first day in years that his companions had found him so nearly wordless mile after eager mile.

Hopalong had reached a steady widening of the cañon and soon came to where a great valley opened out before

him. He had been following the right-hand slope, although the signal fire had been on his left; and he kept to the right-hand slope, trying to follow a course where his tracks would not be stumbled upon in case some wandering rustler rode down to the cañon's mouth. Finally, he reached a point from where he could see up the valley and take in its two sides in one glance. A rise in the floor some miles distant blocked his view of the bottoms, and so he now dismounted and climbed up the cliff.

From its topmost point, he could see the far end of the valley, and he searched it systematically, working up one wall and down along the other; and the regularity in the outlines of three small dots sent his gaze back to them. They nestled close under a high cliff whose face was blackened and scorched, and he knew that he had found a group of cabins. The combination of cabins and black streak, where fire had recently raged, told him that he now looked upon what he had come so far to find.

Now he studied the valley closer at hand, trying to find a cañon or arroyo which would lead him roundabout to the mesa at whose foot the cabins stood; and, after a moment's study, he believed that he had found the way. It must be one which would give him cover in his riding, or he would have to wait until night masked his movements. It was worth trying, and he went down the wall to ride on again.

Now he again drew on that experience which he had mentioned to Red. As long as he had to leave marks of his passing, he determined to render them as innocent

and harmless as possible, and to this end he let his horse go at a walk, and guided it over an erratic course, from one scarce grass tuft to another. It left such a trail as a loose horse would leave in a wandering search for grazing.

In an hour, he had gained the arroyo and watered his horse at a small pool in it. Steadily he pushed on, thankful for the wild and broken country around him, and evening found him on the mesa's top. It was a barren expanse and showed no signs of horses ever having been on it. Reassured, he staked his horse in a hollow and, taking his rifle, went ahead on foot, straight for a blackened spot which he believed marked the place where the signal fire had burned. Twilight was merging into darkness when he at last crept to the edge of the cliff and looked cautiously down upon the roofs of three cabins which sheltered their unsuspecting occupants. Voices reached him with startling clearness, and he strained his ears to catch the one voice he knew. At last it sounded, and made him thrill even while he choked back a laugh.

"Corn ag'in, Charley?" asked the darkness below, which was cut into several fan-shaped areas of sickly light from the door and dirty windows. The voice was aggrieved and querulous, pitched high in expostulation. "Listen, Charley: I wanted a change from beans. I got it. Now let's have beans as steady diet again, be it ever so humble."

"Allee cooked," protested the Chinaman, indignantly. "We no have beans to-night. To-morrow allee same beans. You savvy?"

"I savvy," said the voice, heavy and hopeless in

resignation. "An' that ain't all I savvy, neither. I savvy I'm goin' to be sick ag'in to-night."

"Wassa mally you, allee time get sick?" asked Charley, curiously. "Nobody else get sick. Wassa mally you?"

"Born that way," growled Tex. He did not say that while canned corn disagreed with him, it by no means disagreed with him as much as he pretended; but, having been made quite sick by it the first night, when he had wanted to be sick, he now had to toe the mark he had set for himself, and to groan and grunt and wander about part of the night as though possessed of demons.

"Hey, *Tex!*" came a voice in a bellow. "You was mebbly born unlucky about corn, but you shore make up for it with cards! If we play to-night, we play that penny-ante game that some fool switched for th' reg'lar bunkhouse game. You hear me?"

"An', *Riley!*" bellowed another, somewhat petulantly. "Will you get th' hell outa th' kitchen an' outa Charley's way? Don't you reckon we want to eat some time to-night?"

Tex laughed, passed through the kitchen, and stepped outside to feast his eyes on the ashes of his signal fire. They had been tracked with footprints made by curious and idle men, but not one of the tracks led down into the guilty hollow. He glanced up the cliff and at the deepening purple of the star-riddled sky, wondered for the tenth time if his signal had been seen by his friends, and went back into the bunkhouse.

Supper over, a game of penny-ante got under way

and dragged along until time to turn in. Nevada departed to his own quarters, and in a few minutes, the lights went out. After grunting and groaning awhile Tex got up, put on trousers and boots, threw his coat over his shoulders for protection against the chill of the night air, and wandered forth to kill enough time to give weight to his pretense of sickness.

The moon was up, bathing the valley in silver, and throwing the cliff in shadow, and again he wandered around the houses to look at the havoc made by the little magnifying glass. His head went slowly back as his gaze followed the black crevice to the top of the cliff, the moon shining on his upturned face. Then he looked down again and started to walk slowly past the houses and beyond them.

"*Tex!*" came a sigh, as though the faint breeze were whispering.

Tex leaned slowly forward, peering among the boulders at the base of the cliff, doubting his ears. While he started, incredulously, the call came again, this time a very little louder; and he knew in a flash that his signal had been seen. He glanced swiftly behind him at the houses, nodded, and then wandered along south of the buildings, working slowly into the shadows; and in a few minutes was lost in them. Five minutes later, he wandered out again and back to the bunkhouse, surging with a fierce exultation, but keeping his face calm and cold.

"That you, Riley?" growled a sleepy voice from the darkness of the room as he stepped across the floor and felt for his bunk.



"Yes," grunted Tex, dispiritedly.

"If that damn Chink feeds you any more corn I'll shoot him!"

"Don't you worry, Gila," growled the wanderer, slipping off his boots; "I'm all through eatin' corn."

"Wasmatter?" asked another voice as a bunk creaked.

"Aw, shut yore face an' go back to sleep!" retorted Tex, sliding under the blanket. Somebody's cheap watch ticked persistently in the dark, with a noise hitherto unsuspected; and soon the sounds of regular breathing told Tex that his companions were asleep again. He wondered if Hopalong had yet climbed up the cliff, and chuckled softly at the part his old and long-headed friend had given him to play on the morrow. He had preferred a more active part, a sort of lone-hand stand, but had been overruled. Had he known the solicitude that had caused the overruling he might not have agreed so readily. Five of these rustlers were dead, and two were in Ojos Verdes on a spree, but expected back the following night. That would leave eight, not counting himself, in the valley. If his task was properly performed, there would be less than eight to oppose the Bar 20 when they called in force. He stretched, yawned, and fell asleep with a satisfied smile on his face.

Up on the top of the mesa, Hopalong had regained his horse, mounted it, and started back the way he had come, straight as he could for Red and the others. He made good time, until the cañon mouth sent him riding over the same kind of an aimless and wandering course.

Dawn had sent its beautiful tints flashing through the upper air when he came in sight of the cañon where the long drive trail turned to enter it; and the rising sun was hurling golden lances through the pale glories of the awakening day when he saw Red Connors step into sight from behind a pile of rocks. Back of Red were the grinning faces of Lanky and Skinny, and scrapings among the rocks on the other side of the cañon gave notice as to where Billy and Pete could be found.

"How'd you get so far?" asked the smiling rider, as he drew up.

"Left old John with th' other cayuses an' th' supplies back at th' last reservoir," answered Red. "Find anythin'?" he asked eagerly.

"I found about everythin'," answered Hopalong, stripping off his saddle. He raised his voice. "Pete! Hey, *Pete!*"

Pete's head and great shoulders popped up from behind a rock.

"Yeah—want me?"

"Take this tired cayuse back to camp an' bring me a fresh one, an' th' best you can find," ordered Hopalong. Then he turned toward Red and his two companions. "Got a lot to talk about, fellers. Found Tex, with a belly ache. Otherwise he's all right, an' he'll join us to-day. Now, then, you listen, an' listen close."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### LEADING LAMBS

**M**ARKING time always made Nevada restless, and now he rode away from the houses shortly after breakfast, taking Gila with him, to spend the morning with the drive cattle in the lower end of the valley, to examine the brand sores, and to try to figure just how soon he could start the drive. This left Carp, Irish, Ben, and Curley to loaf around the bunkhouse with Tex. White and Hammond were due home some time that night, and it was predicted that the two trail scouts would return with them; but now Tex knew that the two scouts never would return. Time passed heavily and slowly, and Tex also began to get restless. He started toward the horse corral, his saddle on his shoulder, and then returned to the house.

"Feel like takin' a ride," he growled, dropping the saddle and looking moodily down the valley. "Ain't no use of goin' down there. I've been over that." He swung around and gazed curiously to the south, where the valley drew in almost to a point. "What's up there, Carp? Anythin' worth lookin' at?"

"Nothin' much, only th' beginnin' of th' drive trail where it goes into th' cañons."

"Well, that's somethin', anyhow; it's an excuse,"

growled Tex. "Want to take a ride an' show it to me?"

"Might as well do that as hang around here," said Carp, lazily arising. He went after his saddle and reappeared with it, to follow Tex toward the corral.

Irish was looking after him, arguing with himself, and with a grin at Ben and Curley, he stepped into the house and emerged with his own saddle.

"Comin' along, you fellers?" he asked as he paused near the door.

They shook their heads, yawned, and slumped back against the house.

"We'll get all th' ridin' we want, soon's th' trail herd starts," said Ben.

"I don't care if I never see that drive trail," growled Curley, feeling for tobacco and papers. "Run along an' look at it, you chump."

Tex and Carp were waiting for Irish, and it was not long before the three rode southward at a lope, idly discussing this part of the valley, whose aridity did not appeal to the cattle. Some distance south of the bunkhouse there was a dike of rock which crossed the valley floor and ran from wall to wall, here and there swept clean of soil. The ground sloped gently up to it and down again on the far side. From the foot of the southern slope the houses could not be seen. This end of the valley was broken by ridges and arroyos, and barrancas ran back into the encircling walls, which here were lower and not so steep. The grass by now had almost disappeared, appearing only in tufts here and there; and there were long aisles running

through the sage and greasewood, strips of dirty white where nothing grew.

"This is a fair sample of th' whole butte country, outside our own half dozen valleys," explained Carp, waving his hand around him. "From that dike, back yonder, all th' way down to th' river valley southwest of th' buttes, this is th' kind of country we have to drive over. Outside, on th' sand belt, it's even worse. If it wasn't for th' water holes we made, every twenty-five or thirty miles, an' th' grass around 'em, we'd have to drive through Ojos Verdes."

"Outside," said Irish, "crossin' th' sand belt, we've got one dry drive of more than forty miles."

Talking carelessly, the three pushed on and came close to the mouth of the main cañon, where they drew up quickly and looked at the sun-baked soil. Horse tracks went out of and back into the cañon, the marks of the shoes plain to the eye. The returning tracks here and there lay over the outbound marks and told this part of the story without doubt.

"They look right fresh," suggested Tex, curiously, feeling that he might as well be the one to state such an obvious fact, "though on soil like this it's purty hard to tell th' real age of tracks."

"Tom or George, mebby," said Irish, referring to the two scouts sent by Nevada to ride over the drive trail.

"Mebby," grunted Carp, swinging down from the saddle. He walked over to the tracks and bent down to study them, shaking his head slowly. Tex joined him and dropped to hands and knees, and Carp glanced sideways at him. "What you think, Riley?"



"Well, they *might* 'a' been made by George or Tom," he answered dubiously; "but they look fresher to me, somehow. Still, there ain't been no wind blowin' to drift 'em with dust—what *you* think?"

"Don't know," answered Carp, frankly. "We got a lot of hosses, an' they're all shod. One of 'em might 'a' wandered up this way. These here tracks sorta ramble around," he said, pointing out the devious line which wandered through openings in the sage. "A man ridin' usually goes as straight over ground like this as th' sage will let him. It may be one of our own hosses, strayed up here. If it is, we'll find him somewhere close to th' first water hole."

"Shore; that's it," said Irish, standing up in his stirrups to peer along the double line of tracks. "He wandered all over, at a walk. Reckon he went out to that pool in th' arroyo, an' back ag'in, where th' feed was better."

"Well," said Carp, arising and going to his horse, "mebby; an' then, ag'in, mebby not. May be a pack hoss belongin' to some damn prospector. Anyhow, it won't do no harm to foller it a ways. If it's one of our hosses, it's all right; if it belongs to some prospector wanderin' around in here, it's all wrong. Come on."

They pushed on at a more rapid pace, their eyes on the tracks and the swiftly narrowing walls. In three hundred yards, they were fairly in the cañon, riding between piles of broken rock and shoulders of detritus. Carp pushed into the lead, a scowl on his face, and the scowl deepened as he saw the tracks straighten out and go on in a straight line.

"Prospector, shore as hell!" he growled. "He's shore goin' to wish he'd——"

"Up *bigb* with 'em!" came a snapped command, and several other voices joined in from front and rear.

Carp's startled and swift glance around included the muzzles of half a dozen rifles as part of the immediate scenery, each muzzle with a grim face behind it. For an instant, he hesitated, even in the face of certain death; and then, yielding to plain common sense, he slowly raised his arms as high as those of his two companions.

"Fooled by a smart-Aleck on a hoss!" he grated, thinking about those wandering hoof prints. He glanced at his two companions and saw expressions of blank dismay and growing fear. Three——fools!" he swore. He faced forward again. "Well!" he snapped. "What you mean by this?"

A limping red-head moved slowly toward him from the side, hands brushing low-hung holsters, and disarmed the three in turn and without haste. Behind him came a squat giant, his great hands filled with pack rope; and in a moment the three prisoners were bound and roped to their horses.

The limping red-head pushed back his hat and smiled gently in Carp's face.

"You got no idear how lucky you fellers are," he said. "We're in here to square up for Johnny Nelson. Yo're luckier than th' rest of yore friends, an' 'specially th' two I had to shoot, couple days back. You'll get a trial, if you behave yoreselves."

"Who are you, an' what you doin' here?" blazed

Carp, uncowed and defiant. He did not believe these men were here to square up for Johnny Nelson; but he did believe that they were cattle thieves raiding cattle thieves.

"Hopalong Cassidy, of Montany. Yore name Nevada?"

Carp was staring in strong disbelief into the cold face, and then he looked slowly around at the others, now in plain sight. There was the limping red-head, and at his side stood the huge Pete, a low mountain of a man; behind him was a short, lanky person, with well-bowed legs; at his side a tall, thin, gangling individual leaned lazily against a boulder; and another red-head stood with a Winchester rifle lying in the crook of his arm. Carp never had seen any of these men, but he had heard them profanely described more than once; and as the salient points of each of them impressed themselves on his mind, he felt a sinking in his stomach. Grouped as they were, there could be no doubt: it *was* Hopalong Cassidy and his clannish crew. To make assurance doubly sure, Carp turned to look at Tex, the man who had fought against these men down in the Cunningham Lakes country, and the only man who had escaped them. That was a long time ago, but Riley might have recognized them. Tex's face had lost its expression of surprise and chagrin, and now was a study of amazed disbelief and fear. It turned slowly into stunned acceptance of a disagreeable fact, and as Carp looked at him, Tex slowly and apathetically nodded.

"Yo're six to three," said Carp, desperately, well knowing what a trial would mean for him, and not at all

sure that he would live to have a trial. "I've heard yo're a craggy bunch. You fellers got th' guts to give us a gun each an' shoot it out?"

Hopalong looked with favour on the speaker, hitched up his belts and nodded.

"We've got th' guts," he answered; "but you ain't th' feller we're figgerin' on shootin' it out with." He turned to Pete and Billy. "Throw yore ropes over these two cayuses an' lead 'em back to camp for old John to watch. Leave *that* man here, for awhile," he said, pointing to Tex. "I've seen him some'r's, before this, an' I'm figgerin' on findin' out all about it."

"A lot you'll find out," growled Tex, defiantly.

"Oh, I got ways," retorted Hopalong. "Take them two back to old John, an' tell him to shoot at th' first play they make," he said, waving the two prisoners on their way. He looked after them until the sounds of the horses no longer could be heard, and then he turned a smiling face to Tex, whose bonds already had been removed by grinning and delighted friends.

"Tex, I allus knowed I'd catch you in bad company, if I just waited long enough," said Hopalong, chuckling.

"Anybody that saw me right now would say you was shore right," retorted Tex. "Seems like I'm goin' from bad to worse. Boys! *Boys!*" he exulted. "I'm near tickled to death to see yore ugly faces ag'in!"

"First thing he does is insult us!" laughed Red, pushing forward to shake hands.

For a few minutes it was like an old home week, and then the conversation turned to matters concerning the present moment and the work on hand. After plans

had been talked over and adopted, Tex told his interested friends of his experiences in the buttes, and they roared with laughter when he described the draw-poker game with the marked cards. Then he told them of his game with Layton, its outcome, and how Carp slipped him the gun that saved his life. When he spoke of that he turned a grave and thoughtful face to Hopalong.

"When you told me to pick out a couple of 'em, an' ride down this way with 'em," he said, slowly, "I picked Carp, not only because he was a dangerous man to leave at th' houses, but also because I wanted to get him out of th' fightin' an' save his life." He looked around the circle of friendly faces, and back to Hopalong. "Hoppy, I told Carp I'd square it with him for that gun he gave me, if I ever got th' chance. You reckon that chance will ever come?"

"Wouldn't be surprised, Tex," replied Hopalong, slowly. "He's got to stand his trial, of course; but I reckon I oughta be able to do quite a lot for him, when th' time comes. If you add yore say-so to mine it oughta amount to considerable."

"Considerable," acknowledged Tex, thoughtfully. He swiftly reviewed what he had done for those ranchmen over east, and what his friend Hopalong had done for them. If they both spoke in favour of Carp, it certainly should accomplish something. "Considerable," he repeated in quiet satisfaction. He already had kept Carp from being killed, perhaps, in a fight at the houses.

They returned to the camp in pairs, to eat their noonday meal; but Tex remained at the cañon mouth



and his food was brought to him. When the last pair returned, leaving Old John Winchester and his hungry rifle to guard the camp, horses, and prisoners, they all settled down to pass the time in conversation.

Hopalong had been turning things over in his mind, and the more he thought the less he wanted Tex to go through with the play first decided upon. Tex had planned to return to the bunkhouse and to report that Carp and Irish had followed the tracks made by some prospector and had sent him back to tell the news. They did not know how long they might be gone. This would leave Tex in the bunkhouse to play his hand when his friends descended upon it.

"Tex," said Hopalong, turning, "you can't go back to them fellers. Yo're away from 'em now, an' yo're goin' to stay away from 'em. You've done more than yore share. Better stay here with old John, an' help him watch this end of th' game."

"Well, yo're boss," said Tex, slowly; "but I can go there an' mebby save a lot of shootin'. They won't have no reason to suspect me."

"I made tracks, comin' down that crevice, an' movin' along th' base of th' cliff," said Hopalong, thoughtfully. "They'll show right plain in them ashes. You made tracks when you went to meet me. Things have been happenin' since you joined them fellers. You didn't stop Concho from murderin' that Elbows feller, an' you didn't even call out to Elbows. You shot Layton. Th' scouts they sent down over this drive trail won't come back with them two fellers from Ojos Verdes. That whole cliff took fire after you joined 'em. You

go for a ride with Carp an' th' other man, an' they don't come back. An' don't you go to callin' me 'boss.' I ain't yore boss, but I am a blamed good friend of yours an' of Jane. I told Jane you wouldn't be in th' fightin', an' I'll be damned if you will be! You stay here with old John an' protect this place. Everythin' we need is in our camp, includin' them two thieves. I'll feel a lot better with a man like you lookin' after things here."

"Hoppy," replied Tex, "if I go back I can sit in that bunkhouse an', after Nevada goes to his cabin to turn in, throw down on them fellers. Th' minute I hear you near th' house, I can cover them thieves, an' we'll take 'em without a shot being fired."

"Mebby so," said Hopalong. "Shot or no shot, we'll get 'em just th' same. I see that you don't want to stay here. All right, then—you come along with us, if you want to; but yo're not goin' back to that bunkhouse alone. Yo're out of th' gang, an' yo're goin' to stay out. If it comes to a fight, a few more days won't make no difference; an' I'd rather have a fight with 'em than to take that many more prisoners. Yo're part of this crowd now."

Tex laughed and nodded, well pleased to see a little action with his old-time friends.

"Don't feel much like stayin' here," he said. "I'll compromise with you. Let somebody else stay here, an' I'll go along with you instead of goin' back to th' bunkhouse." He considered a moment. "It's a hundred to one that White an' Hammond go back from Ojos Verdes over th' direct trail. It's a lot shorter. Just

th' same, it might be a good thing to leave somebody here to help yore camp guard in case he gets into trouble."

"I figgered on doin' that," said Hopalong. "Couple of them fellers might get as restless as you an' Carp did, an' come ridin' down here. I never like to overlook no bets. When you three don't get back for dinner, an' th' afternoon goes past without any signs of you, Nevady might get suspicious. As I said, things have been happenin' since you joined that gang. If I was Nevady I'd 'a' got suspicious before now."

"He would 'a' been, too," explained Tex, "except that those fellers never gave a thought to anybody comin' in after 'em from th' west side. Nevady told me that no sheriff's posse would face th' job. Besides, I think they've got plenty of friends over in Ojos Verdes."

Hopalong turned to Billy and Pete.

"Billy, you an' Pete stay near old John, an' watch things. Lay holed up some'r's just this side of camp. There's a bright moon to-night an' it'll shine right down in this cañon. If we come back we'll make ourselves known. If anybody else comes in, you shoot an' do yore talkin' afterwards. Don't take no chances. We don't want you boys an' old John captured or killed, an' Carp an' his friends turned loose to join any ambushers that might lay for us. Savvy?"

"Shore; but ain't I goin' with you fellers?" inquired Billy.

"Don't sound like it, you Siwash!" retorted Red. "If you stay here to guard things, how can you come with us?"

"Don't be so damned smart!" snapped Billy. "Pete an' old John will be enough to stay here! That gang will be so busy with you fellers that they won't have no time to come snoopin' down here!"

"Yeah!" exclaimed Pete, eagerly. "They shore will; but what's th' matter with Billy stayin' here with old John?" He became indignant, and stared at Billy. "What th' hell you allus offerin' *my* services for? Yo're damn generous, *you* are!"

"You both stay here," ordered Hopalong, arising. "Don't show yoreselves, an' shoot quick an' straight. Savvy?"

"All right," growled Billy, disgustedly. "I'd laugh my head off if they *did* come down here after you fellers left, an' me an' Pete cleaned 'em up by ourselves!"

He scowled at the roar of laughter that replied to his words, and sat back to watch his friends saddle up and make ready for their expedition.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### CLOSING IN

NEVADA returned to the bunkhouse with Gila and noticed the absence of some of his men. A glance around told him their identity, and he looked inquiringly at Curley.

"They got restless an' didn't have nothin' to do; so they went ridin' down to th' drive trail," explained Curley in response to the look. "Riley hadn't never seen that part of th' layout."

Nevada nodded and sat down on the wash bench just outside the door, where he sprawled comfortably and looked idly over the valley. His mind was busy, as it always was, and many things passed through it carelessly. He edged over a little as Gila sat down beside him, and they began to discuss cattle, drives, prices, and other things pertaining to their business.

Curley sat down on the ground, his back to the house, and grinned as he glanced up at the chief.

"Got three more shares to split between us," he said, hopefully. "With Towson's that makes four. Purty good, says I. A quarter to you, an' th' rest cut ten ways. That oughta come to quite some money, oughn't it?"

"Quite some," grunted Nevada.



"Is Riley comin' in for a full tenth?" asked Gila, frowning a little.

"Riley don't come in for nothin' till after th' herd's driven an' sold," answered Nevada, thoughtfully. "Then he comes in for half of a full share. He didn't take no chances runnin' 'em off. Stands to reason he ain't earned a full share."

"You goin' to give Carp a thousan' dollars out of Layton's money, just because of that bet he made with Layton?" asked Ben, anxiously. "He won it, but he didn't have no money up. If he'd 'a' lost he could 'a' crawled out of it."

"You ain't noticed nobody crawlin' outa any bets in this outfit, have you?" demanded Nevada. "When he turned to me an' said he'd bet, an' Layton took it up, that shore was a bet; an' I'd 'a' paid it off to th' winner whether th' loser tried to crawl out of it or not. It's down in th' book. Carp gets his thousan' before we split Layton's pile, which ain't as big since Riley trimmed it."

"An' Riley shore did run a hot iron on Layton in that game," said Curley, grinning as he reviewed it. "To call for a show-down on cheatin', like he did, without seein' th' other feller do it, wasn't no tin-horn play. We shore figgered Riley wrong when we classed him with th' tin-horns; that boy ain't no tin-horn at nothin'."

"He shore can play cards," admitted Ben, admiringly. "Lost a little at first with that marked deck in th' draw game; but, *my, oh, my*; how he did ride her when he got his feet in th' stirrups! Then he played

Layton off his feet at Layton's pet stud-hoss. Wonder if he cheated, hisself?"

Gila nodded slowly.

"Shore he cheated! How could he make a fool outa a gambler like Layton, without cheatin'?"

"Then he took a big chance," said Curley, hastily. "Th' man caught at it wouldn't only lose his whole stake an' winnin's, but would have to shoot it out next mornin'. I don't think he cheated. I was right close to him, watchin' every play. So was you, Gila; so was you, Nevady. You see anythin' that looked like cheatin'?"

"Not a thing, but I'll lay a little bet that he cheated."

"Layton was a fool to pull a gun on him, like he did," growled Ben. "If he hadn't made that play, he'd be alive, right now."

Nevada looked sidewise at the speaker and smiled coldly.

"Layton knowed he was a dead man. He knew he would be a dead man before breakfast, next mornin'. He took that chance to save hisself. Layton was nowhere near as good with a gun as he was with cards. He was th' poorest man with a gun of th' whole outfit. You bet he had heard how Riley got his guns out ag'in me, Carp, an' th' others, right here in this house. Layton knowed that sooner or later he'd have to shoot it out with Riley; an' when Riley hung up his guns that night, he saw his one chance out. He knowed, when he come to think about it, *just as I knowed*, that Riley would fix them cards so he could claim that somebody cheated. It didn't make no difference if it was pinned

on Layton, or not; if there was any cheatin' they was to shoot it out before breakfast. If they couldn't prove who did th' cheatin' th' stakes wouldn't be forfeited. Do you catch that little difference? Listen, now: A man caught cheatin' forfeited his pile an' had to shoot it out; if cheatin' was proved, an' it couldn't be pinned on one or th' other, there couldn't be no forfeit; but they had to shoot it out, just th' same. Layton was a dead man when he agreed to that."

"Why, you think Riley was goin' to force that shootin'?" asked Ben.

"Yes," answered Gila, his mind flashing back to the shooting of Elbows. "Riley had tried to force a shootin' before that. He called Layton a liar three, four times; an' he tried hard to get me to move outa th' way."

"Yeah; an' I'm not dead certain that Layton switched that cut," said Nevada, thoughtfully; "not at all shore of it."

"Then who did?" demanded Curley in astonishment.

"Riley could 'a' switched it," answered Nevada, slowly. "I'm not shore that he didn't," he repeated.

"But we was all watchin' close!" expostulated Ben. "Hell! I saw him put th' top half on th' table, an' th' bottom half on top of it. Layton switched that cut, all right."

"Mebby," drawled Nevada. "Let me tell you fellers that we don't begin to know how clever Tex Riley is. I was goin' to go through his belongin's to see if he really was a gambler; but after th' exhibition he gave us, playin' draw with that marked deck, there wasn't no doubt about it. He's a gambler, all right; a ring-tailed,

'hell-roarin', first-class gambler. He's a top-hand puncher, an' he shore can use a straight iron like an artist. He can get that pair of guns out faster than anybody I ever knowed. If I knowed trouble was comin', I'd have to hump myself to beat him on th' draw. Let me tell you that Tex Riley is handy, smooth, an' clever. He's so damn smooth an' clever that mebbly he's got idears in his head of gettin' *my* job. I'm watchin' Mr. Riley; an' th' first false break he makes will be his last."

There was no reply to his remarks, and after a moment he spoke again.

"You fellers keep yore mouths shut an' yore eyes open when Tex Riley is around; that's all. He's sorta joined Carp's crowd, an' he'll get White an' Hammond next, an' it'll be done so nobody can blame him for it. Well, that's enough about Riley.

"Me an' Gila have been lookin' over th' drive cattle, an' we figger we can start 'em over th' trail in four, five days. Hammond an' White will be back from town to-night; an' Tom an' George oughta get back from lookin' over th' drive trail to-night, to-morrow, or th' next day. Then we'll round up an' start."

Noon came without sight of Tex and his companions. The afternoon passed, and still they did not return. As supper time drew near without signs of them, Nevada stepped from his own quarters and looked steadily southward, a frown on his face.

There was no reason to worry about Carp and his companions. There was no thought in his mind that they should not have ridden where they pleased, and

he would not have cared if they missed half a dozen meals, so long as they returned in time to help in the round-up and drive; but, somehow, he was not at ease. Thoughts about Riley and his possible soaring ambition had soured him a little, and he found himself becoming vexed by the non-appearance of the three men.

He snapped his fingers, wheeled, and went back into the house, trying to put the matter out of his thoughts. When Charley called him to supper, he obeyed leisurely and seemed to have become himself again; but he was restless, and kept looking out of the window and listening for the sounds of approaching horses.

In the south end of that valley, had he but known it, events were shaping themselves to give him plenty to worry about. A line of horsemen, with Tex in the lead to act as scout, moved through the arroyos and wound through ravines and washes, and over hills, steadily nearing the great mesa at the point where Hopalong had ridden up the afternoon before. The riders went on in silence, wary and alert, Red Connors and his deadly rifle following Tex and leading the others. They all hoped to gain the mesa top unobserved; but if any rustler or rustlers blundered upon them down in the valley, they would join battle at once and fight it out then and there.

The bottom of the mesa was reached without incident, and soon the horses toiled up the sloping face of a break in the cliff, climbing like so many goats, sure-footed and unhurried. The rim reached, the little cavalcade wound across the more or less level plateau, and as twilight settled down, they came to the hollow



where Hopalong had picketed his mount the day before. There was no need to leave a guard for the horses, and they started off on foot, straight for the blackened section of the distant cliff-top, Tex, Hopalong, and Red in the lead, and the others following closely. Twilight merged into darkness when they came to the edge of the cliff and crawled forward to peer down into the valley. The rising moon was beginning to make its light seen and to pick out certain features of the valley below.

The houses were in the shadow of the cliff, and faint streamers of lamplight struggled through the grimy windows to make pale spots in the dark. The indistinct murmur of voices could be heard, and there were low and intermittent sounds of movement. While they watched from the rim of the mesa, they caught sight of a vague movement on the other side of the valley, barely discernible in the moonlight. It lay in the direction of the end of the direct trail from Ojos Verdes, and soon resolved itself into two horsemen. They could be made out as they turned to follow the trail southward for a few rods, where it turned to go around a deep gulley. These must be White and Hammond returning from town.

They were White and Hammond returning from their spree, and they were thrilling to the urge of vital information, so vital that it was only by the exercise of their wills that they rode as slowly as they did. The moonlight did not reveal the condition of their horses; did not show their heaving flanks, their sweat-stained skins. White and Hammond had driven them as hard

as they had dared, and now, in sight of their destination, pulled down lest by their speed they should give a warning. They drew steadily nearer and, finally, dismounting at the horse corral, unsaddled, turned their mounts loose and, shouldering their saddles, walked awkwardly toward the house.

"Did George an' Tom show up before you fellers left?" asked a voice, which Tex recognized as belonging to Gila.

"No; we didn't see 'em," answered White. "Where's Nevady?"

"Here in th' house. Did Long Ben trim you?"

"No; he wouldn't have nothin' to do with us, at first," replied Hammond.

He stepped through the doorway, glanced swiftly around the room, and then went over to Nevada, and bent down.

"Where's Riley?" he asked in a low voice.

"Out lookin' at th' scenery with Carp an' Irish. Oughta get back any minute, now," replied Nevada. "What *you* want of Riley? Lookin' for to start some trouble?" he demanded ominously.

"Yo're damn right I'm lookin' to start some trouble!" snapped Hammond, meaningly. "So'll you be lookin' to start some, after you hear what I've got to tell you! Fine lot of damn fools *we* are! *Riley; Riley hell!* His name ain't Riley, an' it ain't an' never was Tom Wilkins! What do you reckon it *is*?"

"Don't stand there askin' me questions!" snapped Nevada. "If you know anythin' worth listenin' to, spit it out an' ask questions later!"

Hammond turned swiftly and looked at his friend White.

"Stand ag'in that door casin', where you can see Riley when he rides in." He turned back to Nevada and let his gaze flicker over the faces of the others.

"Long Ben was sore as pizen about th' way we treated him when he was in here," he said, facing Nevada squarely. "Wouldn't have nothin' to do with us, at first. Stood with his back ag'in th' bar, an' laughed nasty and sneeringly every time we looked his way. He was all ribbed up to make trouble, an' trouble shore was in th' air for a little while. It was lucky for all of us that our likker sorta mellowed us instead of egg'in' us on. I did ask him what th' hell he thought was so damn funny, though. He laughed louder than ever an' tossed off another big drink before he answered. Then he sidled along th' bar, hand on gun, grinnin' like a damn fool an' mixin' his chuckles with his hiccoughs."

Hammond drew a deep breath and looked around again.

"He was so genuine in his laughin', an' so damn smart an' wise, that I reckoned mebby he knowed somethin' that we should oughta know. So I told him that we only played a joke on him in here, an' that th' next time you went to town you was goin' to bring him his money an' things. Well, one thing sorta led to another, like th' feller said when he explained about th' fuse an' th' dynamite. We had plenty of drinks in between, an' it wasn't long before th' three of us was settin' at a table as friendly as three drunks ever was. He still kept up his laughin'. He'd take a drink, peer into our

faces, right up clost, punch us in th' ribs, an' then set back an' laugh like a damn fool. Instead of gettin' us mad, it worked th' other way, an' we got to laughin', too. We was thinkin' about how we cleaned him up, an' how we was foolin' him by sayin' it was only a joke.

"He kept askin' us how things was here in th' buttes, an' we told him about Riley joinin' up with us, an' how we reckoned he was Tom Wilkins, that was supposed to 'a' died twenty years ago. When we told him that he busted out laughin' an' near choked to death. He would 'a' choked, too, only we hammered him on th' back, an' got him straightened out ag'in. He was purty well gone in likker by then, an' we would 'a' been, too, only we poured away more than we drunk.

"Then we told him about Riley winnin' in that draw game, against that marked deck, an' how he cleaned out Layton of more'n five thousand dollars, an' then killed him for cheating. I thought he'd choke to death for shore, that time. He laughed so hard he got purple in th' face. Me an' White had smelled a rat in th' very beginnin', but now we begun to smell a whole passel of rats. We bought more drinks and started to act foolish. Asked him what th' joke was; an' we shore found out, before long. You see, th' more he drank an' talked an' laughed, th' more trouble he had to remember Riley's name. Finally he had to ask us what th' name was; an' when we told him it was Riley, he leaned back an' come near dyin' ag'in. Then he told us th' joke he'd played on us! I come near killin' him before th' words was cold, but held myself back, an'

waited. I figgered he might know a lot more, an' he did. We got it all, an' it'll damn near curl yore hair."

"What is it?" demanded Nevada, leaning forward.

"Got to tell it my own way," replied Hammond, glancing toward White to see that he was maintaining his vigil.

"This Riley *hombre* stopped in Ojos Verdes to find out th' best way to get into an' through th' buttes. Long Ben told him about our trail, how to foller it an' how to find us. Ben was afraid Riley'd stay in town an' start gamblin' in opposition to him. Riley is th' greatest gambler th' West ever knowed. Ben was sore at us for th' deal we gave him; he was sore at Riley for a cleanin' up that Riley pulled on him, years ago. He steered Riley right plumb on to us, hopin' that he'd clean us out or that we'd kill him; an' when Riley get back here to-night, Ben shore will get that second wish. We'll kill him, all right. Tom Wilkins has been dead for twenty years; but *Tex Ewalt* ain't dead; an' *Tex Riley* is *Tex Ewalt!*"

He paused a moment for replies, but his auditors seemed to be stunned, and he went on again.

"Yeah—*Tex Riley* is *Tex Ewalt*," he repeated. "Th' *Tex Ewalt* that visited Johnny Nelson a couple summers ago; th' *Tex Ewalt* that got so thick with Hopalong Cassidy an' his crowd; th' *Tex Ewalt* that worked for Buck Peters up in Montany! Does all this mean anythin' to you fellers?"

Angry and high-pitched voices made a loud and profane chorus. Nevada was now on his feet, pacing to and fro like a caged and enraged panther; Gila was



licking his lips and toying with his Colt. The lamplight picked out the faces of the little group, making grotesque gargoyles of them, hideous masks of death. So many things were becoming clear now, becoming clear with a rush; so many apparently innocent things were emerging from behind their hypocritical cloaks of innocence and assuming their real natures. The angry hum of conversation, the conversation of six enraged men, began to thin and to let individual voices be heard. Nevada whirled and stepped into the doorway, to peer for a moment into the south, his face working with rage and the hungry eagerness to kill.

"I'll shoot him down like a dog!" he snarled, turning back into the room to resume his pacing. "Not a word of warnin', not a chance to draw! As he swings down from his saddle he'll die! An' Long Ben will die th' same way, damn him! Him an' his jokes!"

"Long Ben's dead right now," said White, stirring and settling back into a more comfortable position against the door casing. "Hammond slipped Ben's gun into his hand, under th' table, an' whispered that we'd bet him a couple hundred dollars that he was so drunk he couldn't hit a pitchure that was tacked on th' wall behind us. It was on a direct line from him, an' between us. Tell 'em about it, Hammond."

Hammond chuckled grimly.

"Seein' that everybody was playin' jokes, I figgered I'd play one, myself," he said. "Long Ben raised th' gun from his knees an' fired from th' edge of th' table, th' shot passin' between White an' me. We was wrapped up in powder smoke. Soon's he fired, I threw

up my gun an' shot him through th' head. Looked like a reg'lar gun fight. Plain case of self-defense, it was. Long Ben had drawn his gun an' fired th' first shot, before I went for my own gun. Folks couldn't understand how he could 'a' missed me, bein' so close. But I explained how I'd ducked just in time, an' how drunk Ben was. They all opined that I'd had a damn narrer squeak. I admitted it, plenty profane. We was all sorry he'd gone an' got so drunk as to pick a fight with friends. There wasn't no trouble about it, a-tall." He grinned. "Seein' is believin', ain't it? Hell, Concho Charley wasn't th' only man that used his head in his gun-plays; only *he* got hisself killed. That's somethin' I ain't figgerin' to do."

"Tex Ewalt off learnin' about our drive trail," muttered Nevada, still pacing. "Mebby he's got friends some'r's waitin' for a signal to tell 'em when we're ready to start. By G——d!" he shouted, whirling to peer into the faces of his companions. "That fire! *That fire!* Shore as hell he set that off!"

"How could he?" asked Gila, thoughtfully, swiftly reviewing the events of that day. "He was with us, out in th' valley, roundin' up them Triple A strays. He went out with us right after breakfast, an' th' fire didn't start till around eleven o'clock or thereabouts. That was some of Charley's ashes as did that."

Nevada had stopped and was looking at the speaker.

"Reckon mebbby yo're right about that fire, Gila," he admitted. "It was too far ahead to be a drive signal. Reckon we're actin' like a lot of old wimmin. Just because Ewalt is friends with Nelson an' that Bar 20

crowd ain't sayin' that there's any of them fellers down here. Last we heard, they was all up in Montany, except Nelson. This here Ewalt, bein' such a high-class gambler, might 'a' pumped Long Ben about us, saw that there was a lot of money in here for a man that went after it right, an' come in to get it. He shore did get it; somethin' over six thousand for a starter. There's a lot left, too; but now he may reckon that we're on to him an' his play, an' that we won't play him no more. If he figgers that way, he'll be tryin' to get outa th' buttes with what he's got. He mebbly is on his way out now. If he figgers that we'll mebbly play him, an' can get more of it, then he'll be back with Carp an' Irish, innocent as a lamb."

He glanced at White standing in the doorway, and continued.

"There's another thing that we got to remember," he said; "not that it matters a whole lot, though. Bein' a friend of Nelson, he'll mebbly ride around th' buttes an' tell them ranchers just what he saw in here, an' how they can get to us. That ain't nothin' to bother about. It wouldn't be th' first time that we was threatened. Knowin' where to find us an' comin' in after us shore are two different things; mighty different."

He loafed to the doorway and looked out, and when he turned back he was smiling.

"All right," he said. "If Ewalt comes back we'll drop him cold. If he don't come back, we'll get th' herd rounded up, make our drive, an' go on like we did before he come in here. We'll ride back by way of Ojos Verdes an' pick up three, four men to make up for Towson an'

th' others. If any bunch of punchers want to come tearin' in here lookin' for trouble, why, let 'em! *Let 'em!*"

"Yeah—*let 'em!*" growled his companions, and prepared to turn in.

Nevada stepped through the door to go to his own quarters, but paused a moment.

"Remember," he said over his shoulder. "When Ewalt comes back, shoot him!" Then he went on again and moved out of their sight.

Hammond chuckled grimly and began to undress.

"I never reckoned no one man could get this crowd a-millin'," he said. "Nevady purty near called th' turn when he said we was actin' like a crowd of old wimmin."

"Yeah, he did," admitted Gila, blowing out the light.

## CHAPTER XXV

### FINIS

UP ON the mesa, Hopalong and his friends lay quietly waiting for time to pass and for sleep to wrap the inmates of the cabins below. Midnight came and went, and still they waited. Three o'clock rolled around, and then a low command went along the line. Man after man arose to hands and knees and slowly stood up. Tex and Hopalong slipped over the edge of the mesa and made their way silently down the crevice, going slowly and with great care; behind them came the others, as silently as the leaders. Not a heel scraped, not a stone rolled to go clattering down the cliff. Foot by foot, the ghostly line descended, and after what seemed to be a long time, reached the bottom and became lost among the boulders. Tex and Hopalong took the lead again and slipped up to the bunkhouse from the rear. Every man now had removed his boots and moved through the semi-darkness without making the slightest noise. When close to the bunkhouse the line split, Red, Lanky, and Skinny going to and along the south wall; Hopalong and Tex, pressing slowly on, heading for the open door of the kitchen.

They paused beside it, straining their ears. Deep and regular breathing assured them that the cook slept



soundly. They crept into the little room, and when Charley awakened, it was to find a heavy hand over his mouth and the solid pressure of a gun muzzle against his chest. Two men were leaning over him, and he did not struggle. In a moment he was bound and gagged and tied in his bunk, with Tex's whispered threat ringing in his ears. Charley was a cook, and never had been regarded as a combatant; and he was content to keep his status unchanged.

The two punchers now stole along the gallery and paused just outside the door leading into the bunk and eating room, one on each side of the opening. The fireplace was in the east wall, opposite the main door, and it projected out into the room for more than a foot, thus providing a temporary hiding place for the man who now crept to it and stood erect with his back tightly pressed against the wall. In his hands hung a pair of old and battered Colts, weapons nearly as famous as their red-headed, limping owner; the foundations of many stories told around the camp fires of the West. The night was dying, and dawn was already stretching pearly and opalescent curtains across the high upper air.

Tex hid behind the door casing in the gallery, waiting for the moment to enter. Outside the house, three men crept slowly along the rough wall, careful to keep below the two windows, and their leader's eyes were fixed on the door of Nevada's cabin, and his Winchester was balanced for a quick shot. They reached the door, slowly stood erect, and balanced themselves on the balls of their feet, ready for anything.

A sigh sounded from a bunk, followed by the rustle of

a grass-filled mattress and a gentle creaking as the bunk boards took a new strain. Gila rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and sat up, instinctively avoiding hitting the bottom boards of the bunk over him. He yawned, stretched, swung his legs over the side of the bed and stretched again. One glance at three other bunks told him that Carp and his companions had not returned, and he growled something indistinct and threw a boot at Curley.

"Whatcha doin'?" surlily demanded Curley, turning over and blinking.

"Git up!" grunted Gila. "Them three ain't come back yet." He seemed to be puzzled about something, and sniffed the air. "Damn Chink has overslept hisself. Watch me git him outa bed!"

"Wait for me," urged Curley, eagerly. "We'll teach him a lesson, th' lazy yaller-belly. I allus hate to have to hang around waitin' for breakfast." His bunk creaked loudly and drew sleepy protests from two other men.

"Why th' hell can't you fellers do yore oratin' after breakfast," demanded Hammond, in that well-known frank and pugnacious before-breakfast grouch.

"Hope Charley licks th' pair of you," grunted White, turning over to snatch a precious five minutes.

"Yeah," said Gila, derisively.

He arose, his fingers busy with buttons that slipped out of the enlarged buttonholes and made him fasten them again. Three soiled toes poked out of the end of one of his socks, and a heel greeted the new day through a hole in the other sock. He paused to stretch again,

his face strained by a yawn that made his jaws creak; and then his amazed eyes blinked rapidly at a figure which stepped swiftly from behind the angle of the fireplace, a Colt in each upraised hand.

Gila goggled at this figment of a sleepy brain, and then in a flash he believed what he saw. Tex Ewalt slipped through the gallery door with two more Colts. The men in the bunks remained in exactly the same positions they had been caught in, weaponless, helpless. Out of the corners of their eyes, they could have seen their own weapons hanging on nails within easy reach of their hands, but they were too busy looking at the Colts in ready and hostile hands. And before they could do more than gulp, three swiftly moving figures slipped through the main door, guns in hands.

"Well," said Tex, grinning affably, "here I am, back ag'in, with some company. You *bombres* line up ag'in that wall, an' don't open yore mouths. Yo're days are about over, an' we'd just as soon shoot you here an' now as to be bothered by luggin' you out of th' buttes to see you hung. Gila, meet Hopalong Cassidy; Cassidy, meet Curley, an' Ben, an' White, an' brother Hammond. It's sorta lucky that White an' Hammond come back from town last night. They saved us from goin' in after 'em. There's only one man left: that's Nevada, an' he'll be along purty soon lookin' for his breakfast."

"Which reminds me," said Hopalong. "Lanky, put up that gun an' start a fire in th' kitchen stove. Nevady might get notions if there ain't some smoke comin' out of that chimbly; an' we don't want nobody

hereabouts to get no notions. When you get that fire goin', Lanky, you untie that Chink an' tell him to show hisself careless like outside th' door, where Nevada can see him if he happens to be lookin' out of th' window. Keep yore gun on him, an' if he makes any mistakes, drill him."

"Damn you, Ewalt!" grated Gila, venomously.

"*Ob-bo!*" exclaimed Hopalong, smiling at his gambling friend. "You hear *that*, Tex? What did I tell you? You'd 'a' got a fine reception if you'd come back here alone, like you wanted to! I told you that good enough is good enough; there ain't no use pesterin' no job that is finished. I told you that you was all through in here."

"Would 'a' been sort of paintin' th' lily," said Tex with a chuckle. "Betcha Long Ben got talkative. Nobody else knowed me." He turned to the scowling line-up. "You fellers can set down, if you want, an' rest yore backs ag'in th' wall." He glanced at some lariats hanging on their pegs. "Skinny, you an' Red better tie up these gents so they won't hurt themselves." He sniffed, and glanced toward the gallery. "'Lanky's got a fire goin'; an' now begins th' big show."

Hopalong stepped quickly toward the open door, his face cold and determined. He remembered what had come to Johnny Nelson and who was responsible for it all. In his way, Nevada was something of a genius, and Hopalong did not like to think of a genius being hung. There also was a personal tint to this affair, since Johnny Nelson was so close a friend. It was as though Nevada had injured Hopalong directly. Then there

was another thing: Nevada was reputed as being uncanny on the draw, as being a high-class gun-man, and well able to take care of himself in fast company. There would be no disgrace in indulging in the sport of an even break with such a man. Nevada should have a chance to shoot it out, and to die like a man and not like a criminal, dangling from the end of a rope.

The cook could be heard moving about in the kitchen, preparing breakfast. Charley was not bothered by such an abrupt change in employers, not nearly as much as he was by the presence of Lanky Smith and his big gun. Lanky had a way of looking right through a man, and he was looking that way now. Further than that, Charley believed in the potency of plenty of hot and well-cooked food. He certainly could lose nothing by behaving himself, obeying orders, and cooking a breakfast worthy of the name; and he was quite certain that he would live longer. He glanced at the cold-eyed Lanky and the gun that never swung away from his own person. Colt revolvers are not calculated to inspire music in those on whom they are trained by hostile hands; but Charley sang his regular morning song and drew satisfaction from the glimmer of a smile that came to the face of his personal watchdog.

"That's th' way," said Lanky softly. "You an' me are goin' to get on real well. Sing to Nevaday, but not too loud; sorta gentle like, you savvy?"

"Me savvy, boss," said Charley, and continued to sing. He stepped outside to empty a pan, and an impatient call made him turn slowly toward Nevada's house, and grin.



"Ain't breakfast ready, Charley?" demanded the boss of Snake Buttes.

"Prittie soon, boss," answered Charley. "You come catchum," he invited, and went back into the kitchen, where the sputter of bacon filled the morning air with sweet music and a rare aroma.

Hopalong was peering through the grimy north window, which was in the bunkhouse wall between the gallery and the northwest corner. He flashed a look at Gila.

"Start talkin', you fellers, an' talk nat'ral," he ordered.

"Go to hell!" snapped Gila, savagely. "Bait yore own traps yoreself!"

"Good man," said Hopalong, nodding; and then he stepped through the doorway and swiftly faced the north, where Nevada was slowly walking from his own front door.

Nevada stopped as though shot. For a moment he could not believe his eyes; and then, cursing bitterly, he crouched and waited, his hand poised for the draw, its fingers spread apart like talons.

Hopalong, limping almost imperceptibly, slowly walked toward the rustler, his own hands swinging a little and brushing the butts of the low-hung Colts.

"Mornin'," he called, gently. "Johnny Nelson sends his regards, an' I'm deliverin' 'em. You can have 'em when you move."

Nevada still crouched, his face a thundercloud, his mind racing on the masked trail of this stranger's identity; and then he understood. This grim, limping red-head could be no other than Hopalong Cassidy,

Tex Ewalt's friend. Everything was plain in a flash. That had been a signal fire, and Tex Ewalt, by some trick of the devil, had set it off. Slipped hot coals in the bottom of Charley's cold ashes, perhaps. His friends had been close at hand all the time, and now they were here.

He crouched a little more, and then his hand streaked downward, urged to top speed by the knowledge that he was face to face with a man whose draw never had been beaten. That thought was fatal to whatever chance he might have had; it made him sacrifice accuracy for speed, as it had, perhaps, made others before him. The red-head did not seem to move, yet a cloud of smoke burst from the top of his right-hand holster and the echoes of the shots crashed back from the cliff. Through the smoke veiling Nevada, his knees were seen to buckle. He twisted, raised his gun, dropped it, and fell like a stone. Johnny Nelson's regards had been delivered by a worthy messenger.

Hopalong turned and walked back to the bunkhouse, where his friends peered from door and windows.

"Skinny," he said, calmly, "after breakfast you ride to camp an' tell th' boys to move up here. We'll leave old John, Pete, an' Billy in th' houses while we take these fellers to Gunsight; an' we'll bring back a big outfit an' drive all these cattle back where they belong."

And so ended the malignant threat of the Snake Buttes, which hereafter were to be tame and colourless.



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Golden Scorpion, The. Sax Rohmer.  
Goose Woman, The. Rex Beach.  
Greater Love Hath No Man. Frank L. Packard.  
Great Impersonation, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
Great Moment, The. Elinor Glyn.  
Great Prince Shan, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
Green Archer, The. Edgar Wallace.  
Green Dolphin, The. Sara Ware Bassett.  
Green Eyes of Bast, The. Sax Rohmer.  
Green Goddess, The. Louise Jordan Miln.  
Green Timber. Harold Bindloss.  
Grey Face. Sax Rohmer.  
Gun Brand, The. James B. Hendryx.  
Gun Gospel. W. D. Hoffman.
- Hairy Arm, The. Edgar Wallace.  
Hand of Fu-Manchu, The. Sax Rohmer.

# THE BEST OF RECENT FICTION

- Hand of Peril, The. Arthur Stringer.  
Harriet and the Piper. Kathleen Norris.  
Harvey Garrard's Crime. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
Hawkeye, The. Herbert Quick.  
Head of the House of Coombe, The. Frances Hodgson  
Burnett.  
Heart of Katie O'Doone, The. Leroy Scott.  
Heart of the Desert. Honore Willsie.  
Heart of the Hills, The. John Fox, Jr.  
Heart of the Range, The. William Patterson White.  
Heart of the Sunset. Rex Beach.  
Helen of the Old House. Harold Bell Wright.  
Her Mother's Daughter. Nalbro Bartley.  
Her Pirate Partner. Berta Ruck.  
Hidden Places, The. Bertrand W. Sinclair.  
Hidden Trails. William Patterson White.  
High Adventure, The. Jeffery Farnol.  
Hildegard. Kathleen Norris.  
His Official Fiancee. Berta Ruck.  
Honor of the Big Snows. James Oliver Curwood.  
Hopalong Cassidy. Clarence E. Mulford.  
Hopalong Cassidy Returns. Clarence E. Mulford.  
Hopalong Cassidy's Protege. Clarence E. Mulford.  
Horseshoe Robinson. John P. Kennedy.  
House of Adventure, The. Warwick Deeping, author of "Sor-  
rell and Son"  
House of Intrigue, The. Arthur Stringer.  
Hunchback of Notre Dame. Victor Hugo.  
Hustler Joe and Other Stories. Eleanor H. Porter.  
  
Illiterate Digest, The. Will Rogers.  
Immortal Girl, The. Berta Ruck.  
Inn of the Hawk and Raven, The. George Barr McCutcheon.  
In Another Girl's Shoes. Berta Ruck.  
In a Shantung Garden. Louise Jordan Miln.  
Indifference of Juliet, The. Grace S. Richmond.  
Inevitable Millionaires, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu. Sax Rohmer.  
Inverted Pyramid. Bertrand Sinclair.  
Invisible Woman, The. Herbert Quick.  
Iron Trail, The. Rex Beach.  
Isle of Retribution, The. Edison Marshall.  
It Happened in Peking. Louise Jordan Miln.  
I Want To Be a Lady. Maximilian Foster.  
  
Jacob's Ladder. E. Phillips Oppenheim.









